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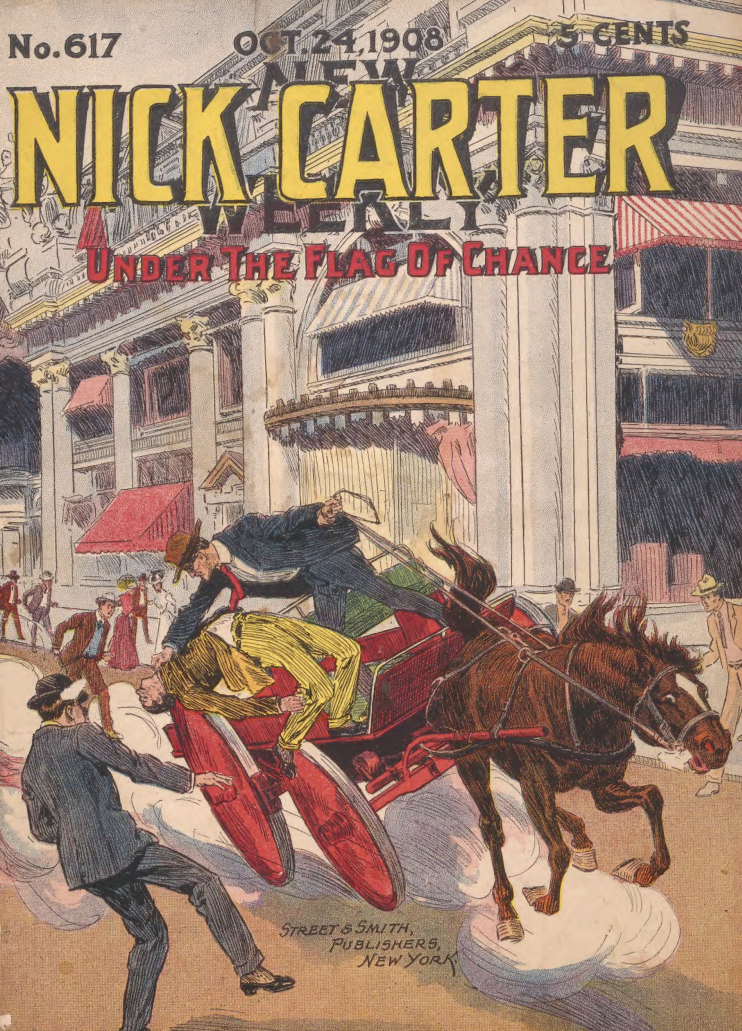
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

UNDER THE FLAG OF CHANCE



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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Under the Flag of Chance;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S PHENOMENAL STOCK DEAL.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A COWARDLY BLOW.

The yacht's boat had only touched for a moment at the green and slippery steps near the end of the old pier. One man leaped out, waved his hand to the light-haired officer who held the tiller-ropes, and then the four white-uniformed sailors "gave way," and the boat darted out into the basin again.

The landed passenger came up on the dock and saw before him one of the worst streets and lowest neighborhoods of Baltimore.

It was mid-forenoon, but there were more idlers than workmen in sight.

And these idlers were not nice men to look at, either black or white. Unless a man had business of importance in this neighborhood it behooved him to keep to the better streets.

Although the person who had landed from the yacht seemed amply prepared to take care of himself in most emergencies, he did not linger about the dock. Caution is always an attribute of the really brave character.

Nick Carter was not a man to run from any danger; but just at this present moment he was not anxious to get into any trouble.

He was on an important mission—or had been. He had gone south as far as Washington, and later to the shore of Tangier Sound, in the Chesapeake Bay, for an article which proved to be of great value to him as a clue in bringing to book certain evil-doers.

He bore in his hand a small, square wooden box, the cover nailed on, and a bit of spun yarn tied about it to carry it by.

The box had no marks upon it, and did not look to be of any particular importance. Appearances are sometimes deceiving, however.

As Nick came to the first wide street, where there was more traffic, there was a group of these loafing gentry idling there. They stood about in such an attitude that Nick saw at a glance it would be difficult to make one's way through them without pushing some one aside.

Ordinarily he was not one to take the gutter for any man. But peaceful measures were more to his tastes on this particular occasion.

He promptly crossed the street and went on the other side. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed—and to his surprise—that the formation of the group instantly changed. Several of the men broke away from it and hurried away in different directions. One, however, came directly after him!

Of course this might have been mere chance; yet the detective's suspicions were aroused.

He had been now, for some weeks, investigating a combine that had hundreds of thousands of dollars behind it, and was manned by a crew of men who

would scarcely hesitate at any atrocity to accomplish their ends.

Nick had in this square box something that would be likely to "put a spoke in the wheel" of the leader of this very gang. If that leader, or his principal henchman, knew of it, they would be very likely to take desperate measures to get this important bit of evidence out of Nick's hands.

The detective fully appreciated this possibility. It was, therefore, not at all strange that he should quicken his pace.

He desired to get into a better part of the city—a locality more frequently patrolled by the police, at least.

The fellow who had crossed the street was directly behind him. Nick saw that others of the corner gang seemed closing in, too.

Was it an organized attempt to "do" him; or were his fears groundless? Nick Carter hated to take to his heels and *run;* it seemed so childish a thing to do, especially if the danger were imaginary.

He had perfect control of his features, and nobody, by looking into his countenance, would suspect that his mind was in the least disturbed.

Nothing escaped his attention, however. At a move by the man behind him, or one of the other ruffians who seemed to be centering their attention on him, Nick would have sprung away at top speed.

It did seem rather foolish to expect an attack in open daylight like this. Nick knew the quarter very well, however; and there was not a uniformed officer in sight.

Suddenly he found that a heavy truck was backed across the sidewalk to the door of a warehouse, directly in his path. Heavy barrels were being lowered from an upper floor by tackle, and a couple of strapping darkies were receiving them on the wagon.

The cart was high, and effectually barricaded the sidewalk. Other pedestrians—what few there were—passed out into the roadway to get around the obstruction.

But as Nick drew nearer he saw that two or three men already stood at the heads of the horses attached to the truck.

A group was forming across his path again—and among the idlers he was sure were several of the ruffians whom he had noticed on the saloon corner.

The stage was being "set" again. If he passed through that group there would be trouble. He knew it as well as he wanted to know anything.

At the instant of his discovery another barrel came down on the run, and the two roustabouts on the truck caught it. Nick glanced up and chanced to catch the eye of one of these negroes who had just unhooked the dangling rope sling in which the barrel had been lowered.

His big mouth was opening to yell "Up ah-*gin!*" to the man on the floor above, when he saw Nick's eager look and the beckoning of the detective's hand.

He understood Nick's gesture, and there was sufficient command in it for the darky to obey without question—prompted by that inherited attitude of the race toward any insistent white man.

Nick's attitude and gesture had meant "Give me that rope!" and the negro obeyed without thinking *why* he should do so.

He let the heavy hook and sling go, and it swung, pendulumlike, over Nick's head. The detective leaped lightly into the air and seized the heavy hawser with his left arm, wrapping the rope about his arm.

He had run a couple of steps to gain momentum, and the weight of the big hook helped swing him, too. His intention was to vault the tail-board of the wagon and land on the clear sidewalk beyond, so as to escape the trap which he believed was laid for him if he stepped into the street.

The chance he took was a good one, and, thanks to Nick's athletic training and his phenomenal strength, he would have accomplished the trick with neatness and despatch, had it not been for one oversight.

A negro is not to be depended on to use his brains in an emergency—at least, not this kind of a negro.

The fellow had flung Nick the rope because he realized by instinct that the white man wanted it. But his instinct did not go far enough!

It did not stop his mouth. His lips were already wide open, and from his powerful lungs the melodious hoot went up to the sky:

"*Up ah-gin!*"

The bellow warned Nick what to expect, yet he could not help himself at the moment. He was already in the air, with his feet curled up, and flying over the cart's tail.

There was a dynamo in the building, and this fall and tackle was run by electric power. The man above had his hand on the switch and the moment the bellow of the roustabout came up to him he moved the key.

With a rattle of chain the hook and sling whizzed upward!

The sudden jerk warned Nick what was forward. He was at that identical second only half-way over the obstruction, and he did not want to drop into the cart. Before he could get down again his enemies might form another combination in front of him.

Therefore, as the hook shot upward, he took a desperate chance, swung as hard as he could, stuck out his legs, and leaped!

He cleared the wagon-body and the big wheel. He had been carried some feet into the air before letting go, however, and he landed on the flagging with force enough to jar him badly. However, he kept his feet.

"My land o' Massy!" yelled the negro on the cart. "Dat w'ite man's sure nuff got wings!"

And it looked as though this were a fact, for Nick did not stop an instant to recover from his shock, but started off as rapidly as he could travel without actually running.

He did not look behind much, but he realized that only a few moments' grace were left him. After be-

ing balked twice the scoundrels who were after him would be likely to make a more open attack.

The first corner which promised him a chance was some distance ahead yet.

He heard heavy boots pounding upon the pavement, and knew that the gang must be close upon him.

He was unarmed—without a weapon of any kind but those nature had given him. And to back up against a wall and try to hold off this gang with his bare fists would be suicidal.

He was about to take to his own legs, hoping that he might outdistance these enemies, when suddenly a man darted from across the street—just barely getting under the noses of a team of horses without injury—and reached his side.

Nick swung half-around, with doubled fist, clinging to his box with his left hand now. But the man dodged and at the same moment said in a low voice:

"Don't strike *me*, Mr. Carter! But get around the corner as soon as you can. These fellows have got their minds set on what you're carrying. I'll hold 'em back."

Nick had but a momentary glimpse of the speaker. He was young, smooth-faced, tall, and with plenty of black hair and eyebrows of the same hue. There was a familiar look about him, yet at the moment the detective could not place him.

And he was too eager to escape with his precious parcel to ask questions or to stop for argument. He took to his heels and did not look around until after he had turned the nearest corner.

Then when he stopped and assumed a more dignified gait, on an avenue where decent people were passing, neither his strange friend nor the ruffians were in sight.

"But, by Jove! I've had my lesson," muttered the detective. "Shade is certainly after me close. There *was* one of his men hanging about Mr. Cameron's place down there on the Sound, and the gang know I have secured Abe Grout's lost letter.

"Or, if they don't know all this, they're suspicious of my movements, and know that I am carrying something which is important as evidence to be used against them.

"And right here is where I get rid of this thing," and Nick glanced down at the box. "I see an express office yonder. They may get me, but I warrant they won't get the box," and he dove across the street and entered the express office.

In ten minutes he had labeled the box, addressing it to his own street and number in New York, and put a value on it which necessitated the carrying company putting the box in a safe under lock and key. With the receipt for it in his pocket, he departed from the express office in good spirits.

And he was scarcely on the street again when the wisdom of his recent action was proven. Nick Carter was mighty glad he had gotten rid of the box as he did.

There was a sudden disturbance in a crowd on the curbing just beyond the door from which he had made his exit. Standing as he did on the step, Nick could see over the heads of other people.

Two men seemed to be arguing—one a burly negro and the other a well-dressed white man. The latter faced the detective, and after the first second of scrutiny Nick recognized the man as the person who had warned him of his danger not many minutes before.

More than ever did the person's face appear familiar to Nick. But that fact did not start the detective plowing his way toward the scene of the argument.

This incentive to take a hand in the row was furnished by something that Nick saw over the shoulder of the white man. Creeping up behind the unsuspecting man was a slighter individual, and by the way he held his hand down beside him, Nick was sure the rascal had a black-jack, or slung-shot, and was preparing to use it on the white man.

The gang, thwarted by the stranger in their attempt to "do" Nick, had pitched upon the former for revenge.

With a shout, the detective swung the crowd right and left and struggled to get to the combatants. But it was over—the cowardly blow was struck—before he could save the victim!

The negro said something which brought the white man's fist in collision with his features as an answer. Big as the buck negro was, he was sent end for end, landing on his back on the pavement.

But the next instant Nick saw the smaller man's arm swing up, and then his weapon descended upon the head of the well-dressed man!

The latter dropped like a stricken steer—without a groan. The crowd parted, and several of the men started to run. Nick knew that they must all be concerned in the hold-up.

But he kept his own eyes fixed upon the fellow who had delivered the cowardly blow. That man dodged away by himself, and started to cross the street.

Nick sprang after him. He was several yards behind, but he saw a uniformed officer coming post-haste to the scene.

"Stop that man, officer!" Nick shouted. "That fellow in the brown derby. He's committed an assault!"

The policeman, who was a big, beefy fellow, started for the slighter man. Indeed, he had the villain already in his grasp.

But Nick saw the man turn, whisper something in the cop's ear, and the officer let go his hold of him!

It was such a plain and brutal attempt to evade the performance of his duty that Nick could scarcely keep from handing the big coward a solid punch as he passed him.

"You mucker!" the detective gasped. "If you won't catch the scoundrel, *I will!*"

CHAPTER II.

THE CHARIOT-RACE.

Nick Carter knew that there would be plenty of people to attend to the injured man who had been felled by the black-jack of the ruffian whom he was pursuing.

Even the policeman could waddle over and send in an ambulance call, and get medical assistance. But it looked as though the skinny little fellow in the brown derby would make good his escape, as far as the police were concerned.

Nick Carter, however, did not propose that such should be the case, if he could help it.

He had seen the blow struck. He had likewise seen the person who committed the assault escape from the police officer's grip by saying some magic word in the ear of that guardian of the peace.

The influence of the man in the brown hat might be sufficient to aid him in escaping from any police officer he met. For that reason Nick regarded it his duty to keep on the trail.

The fellow turned a frightened glance over his shoulder and saw the blazing face of Nick right behind him. He tried to double and run back into the crowd.

Nick was after him in a flash.

The fellow doubled again, and ran in front of a cable-car, risking his neck thereby. But the car was going fast, and Nick was around the rear end of it and on the fellow's heels before he could gain any shelter.

It was a close chase, and although nobody else sought to help Nick, he did not look like a fellow whom it would be safe to thwart. They all gave both pursued and pursuer full room to pass!

Nick's hand was stretched forth half a dozen times to seize the little man, but he dodged like a boy. And every time he glanced back at his pursuer he showed his teeth like a rat brought to bay!

Whether he caught the man or not, the detective was sure he should never forget his face. It was indelibly stamped upon his memory, and he was sure a more wicked countenance he had seldom seen.

This thought was subservient, however, to the main desire of his mind. *That* was to catch the fellow who had black-jacked the stranger who had warned him; and Nick put forth every effort to this end.

They had only come half a block or so from the scene of the cowardly attack on the unfortunate man, but several minutes had elapsed, for the object of Nick's pursuit dodged about the roadway, in and out among the wagons and around the cars like a cat.

He evidently saw, however, that heavy as Nick was, he was not to be thrown off the trail. The detective could turn and twist almost as rapidly as the ratlike man. He was at his heels whichever way the villain turned in the crowd.

Suddenly there was an unexpected change in the proceedings. A heavy express-wagon came jolting along through the side street just as Nick and the ratty man reached the corner, and turned into the wider street.

The wagon stopped by the curb and the driver got down on some business. The wagon-body was empty and the horse drawing it was a strong and spirited-looking creature.

The rat-faced man uttered a snarl of joy and sped straight for this wagon. He evidently knew it, and its driver, for, shouting something that was unintelligible to Nick but evidently understood by the owner of the vehicle, the fugitive darted up to the seat, seized the reins, and yelled to the horse.

The driver had been about to hitch his animal, but at this move he sprang aside and made no attempt to stop the frightened horse.

In a moment horse and wagon were dashing off at a dangerous pace through the crowd, while Nick was left afoot—and behind.

Not only that, but the New York detective found himself hampered by people in the street, notably the man whose horse had been pressed into service.

This fellow ran full against Nick, and had not the latter been going so fast, he would have been overturned. But the collision delayed the detective until the wagon was out of immediate reach.

It was evident, too, the fellow's intention to pick a fuss with the pursuer over the collision. Nick stopped for just one thing.

He doubled his fist, put all his good-will into it, and when the fellow landed against the curbstone, a dozen feet away, his interest in the proceedings was over.

Pounding over the pavements went Nick Carter, stopping not at all in his career, for although the wagon with his man was far ahead, he was too dogged by nature to give up the chase at once.

Something might turn up to assist him. There is always a chance of the wheel of fortune turning. Nick did not know when he was beaten.

He ran with head back, elbows to his sides, and breathing in the approved fashion of professional runners. And Nick Carter could cover a deal of ground with his long strides.

The wagon was a block away, the street was growing freer of vehicles and people, so that the detective could look far ahead and pick and choose his route to better advantage.

And then suddenly he saw something that filled him with joy. A butcher's boy in a two-wheeled meat-cart was jogging along just ahead of him. This was the only open vehicle, saving the express-wagon, in sight.

Nick put on speed, having reserved some steam for a break like this, and caught the jaunting cart, although the butcher-boy had whipped up, being excited by the passing of the heavier wagon. Butcher-boys are always eager for a race, and seem to consider but little the life and limbs of foot-passengers.

Nick caught the tail-board, gave a mighty leap, and

sprawled into the cart among the jouncing baskets. He was on his feet again in a moment—before the driver could pull in the horse and profanely demand what he wanted.

"Your turnout, my boy!" replied Nick briskly, seizing the reins from the youth's amazed grasp.

"Hi, you! gimme my hoss!" bawled the young butcher.

"I've got to borrow it, son."

"I can't let yer have it. Give over!" roared the youth, brandishing his fists.

But Nick had pulled out a bank-note and held it out to him.

"Take this, and say nothing. I've got to catch that fellow ahead."

"I can't do it!" whined the boy, eying the bank-note with avarice. "Pop'll whale the life out of me!"

"And I'll be likely to do worse than that for you, if you don't," declared Nick grimly.

He thrust the bill in the boy's hand. The fingers of the young butcher closed upon the money convulsively.

Nick had held in the horse with a strong hand. Now he grabbed the boy by the collar, lifted him bodily out of the wagon, and dropped him, unhurt, to the gutter.

The boy bawled, the crowd running behind roared after the detective; the latter laid the slack of the reins over the back of the old horse and rolled on in the wake of the flying express-wagon.

Few seconds had been wasted when Nick took up the chase in this chariot. He stood upright, scorning the seat, and urged the horse on to its best pace. The other turnout was not so far ahead.

The two vehicles came pretty near having the street to themselves just now. At least, every other wagon got out of the way.

Undoubtedly most folk thought it was a runaway—that the express-wagon horse had become unmanageable. To this end two different individuals ran out into the road and tried to stop the fugitive's horse. He rose up in his seat and cursed them—undoubtedly with fluency, but it was lost on them, as he went on so fast.

Finally a policeman attempted to leap in the roadway ahead of Nick's horse. At that the detective feared that the man ahead had more than one friend on the force, and that he would have trouble even if he caught up with the blackleg.

He managed to swerve his horse around this cop, however, and then urged the animal to greater speed. The butcher's horse was soon up to the tail-board of the other wagon. The ratty man looked around as he had when he was running afoot, and tried to pull his horse in ahead of Nick's as the latter forged forward.

The detective, however, had come too far and worked too hard to be balked in that way. He yelled to the butcher's steed and shook the reins. The willing horse let out another notch!

The wheel of the butcher's cart was abreast of the hind wheel of the express-wagon. The man looked around again, and Nick saw that he was pale and that the sweat stood on his face. He had lost his brown derby, and the detective saw that he was a bald man and had a peculiar scar—like an inverted carrot—over his left eyebrow.

This Nick saw in a flash. But he was not so much interested in the fellow's personal appearance then.

The two horses were running at a fearful pace. Had the wheels of the vehicles become locked there would undoubtedly have been a wicked wreck!

"Hold up, you fool!" commanded the detective. "Stop!"

But the other did not try to pull in his horse. Indeed, he had the best of the animals, although his wagon was so much heavier. The butcher's horse had put on his last pound of steam in this spurt, and Nick saw that it was already falling back again.

"Halt, you scoundrel!" commanded the detective.

The man cursed him, and excitedly yelled to his horse. The latter responded nobly.

Having overhauled the villain, the detective was on the point of seeing him escape, after all. It was too much to stand.

With a shout of anger Nick flung the reins down and leaped over the wheel toward the swaying body of the express-wagon!

CHAPTER III.

NICK DRAWS A BLANK.

It was a desperate attempt at capture; but Nick was in a desperate frame of mind.

He had seen a man stricken down by a most dastardly blow, and the scoundrel who had committed the crime was almost within his grasp.

Besides, this fellow had attempted to injure Nick himself. He was one of a gang whose object, it seemed, had been to waylay and rob the detective in broad daylight.

Nick was ready to risk a good deal to capture his man. He did. He risked his own neck in the attempt!

Fortunately he retained his equilibrium on landing in the express-wagon. The horse that drew it was going at full speed, and the man driving could scarcely keep his seat; but the detective's wonderful nerve and poise enabled him to keep from pitching into the street.

The butcher's horse was a creature of little spirit, excepting under the lash. It fell behind at once, and was stopped by a citizen.

Nick paid his discarded chariot and steed no thought, however. Saving himself from falling out of the express-wagon was a job that necessitated his full and complete attention!

He had scarcely landed in the wagon when he

gained a position directly behind the seat. Reaching forward, he seized the lines from the fellow's grasp, and, with his other hand, caught a firm grip on the man's collar!

"Ah-h, leggo me!" snarled the scoundrel, turning his writhing face on the detective again.

"Not for Joe!" was the detective's grim response, and, with both coat-collar and shirt gathered into his grip, the man was not likely to wrench out of his garments and so escape.

Meanwhile Nick dragged back on the lines, trying to stop the big brute of a horse that by now had become thoroughly frightened and almost unmanageable.

"Lemme go, I say!" whined the man.

"Shut up!" commanded the detective.

"Ah-h, blind ye! ye would, would ye?" gasped the fellow, writhing and struggling. "I'll make ye suffer for this! Ow! Ow!"

"This yell came when Nick ground into his shoulder in admonition.

"Lemme go!" he roared.

"I'll let you go—when I can find a decent cop to hold you," grunted Nick.

"Ye'll not give *me* to no cop!"

"I will if this blamed horse don't break both of our necks!" panted the detective.

The man's hands were both free, and he clawed at Nick like a wildcat; but the detective held him off at arm's length, and he could do little real damage, saving to the back of Nick's hand, which he *did* lacerate in fine shape!

But the detective would not loose his grip.

"Ah, you little ape!" he ejaculated, as the blood ran. "Scratch, and be hanged to you!"

"Lemme go!" yelled the man again.

He stopped tearing at the detective's arm and hand, and an expression of horrid triumph crossed his evil face. He fumbled in an inner pocket of his coat, his ferret eyes gleamingly on his antagonist.

"Yer'd better drop it, cull!" he cried shrilly.

Nick, however, was making some impression on the hard-bitted horse now, and with one foot braced against the seat was dragging the animal back until his nose almost touched his breast.

He paid no heed to the threat in either the man's look, or in his words. In an instant the blackleg had hauled out a small object, which he clutched tightly in his palm, reaching it back to throw with violence at his antagonist.

"Leggo!" he snarled again.

Not until then did Nick glance at him. He saw the thing in the scoundrel's hand.

It was a small vial, corked with glass, the stopper tied on with a bit of gut. Nick realized what it contained instantly.

The denizen of Whitechapel and the other slums of London has for two decades fought with this terrible weapon that the blackleg now held in his hand.

Perhaps the fellow had come from the other side of the pond, and brought all the wickedness he had learned in his native haunts with him.

The vial was filled with vitriol. To dash it in Nick Carter's face was his deadly intention. The glass was doubtless fragile, and it would be next to impossible for Nick to dodge a missile flung so squarely at him, and from so short a distance.

The wretch meant to smash the bottle full in Nick's face, and the result would be disfigurement for life—if not death itself!

Nick's brain worked rapidly in that strained moment.

Brave he was, but the thought of having his eye put out with vitriol was enough to try the courage of any man.

He dared not let the horse go free. The animal was by no means conquered. If the lines were loosened, he would plunge away at a terrible pace, and both men might be flung out of the wagon and killed.

To allow the blackguard to escape was not a part of Nick's plan, either. He had gone through too much during these past few minutes to fail in his capture of the villain now!

"Lemme go, or I'll let yer have it, blast yer!" snarled the man again.

Nick's decision was taken instantly. He still held onto the lines, but he bent his body forward and shot the man out of the seat, holding his dead weight over the front wheel of the jouncing wagon.

"Drop that bottle! Drop it instantly, or, by heaven, I'll drop you!" cried the detective.

The intent—his act and words—were so plain that the fellow did not fail to understand him!

He might yet fling his bottle at Nick, but if the latter relaxed his grip on his antagonist, the villain would fall to his death under the heavy wheels of the wagon!

There was scarcely a choice left the fellow! In an instant, from holding the whip-hand over the detective, he was again at his mercy.

He uttered a squawk of fear, and his fingers loosened their clutch on the bottle. It fell to the pavement, and, of course, was harmlessly broken there.

Nick yanked him inboard again and slammed him down on the seat with a force that must have jarred every tooth in the fellow's head.

"Sit there, you rat!" gasped the detective, and for a few seconds grabbed the lines in both his hands, and flung his full weight against the horse's bit. The animal came to a full stop, sliding along the street on his haunches, the blood running from his lacerated jaws.

Recovering himself almost instantly, and as several citizens sprang for the animal's head, Nick secured a clutch on his captive again. With him in his arms he leaped from the wagon to the sidewalk, into the midst of a rapidly growing crowd.

Again Nick saw no policeman near; but a big tour-

ing-car, which seemed to have joined in the chase of the runaway wagon, rolled in by the curb and a big man in cap and goggles, who sat under the wheel, waved a gauntleted hand at Nick.

"Well done! Mr. Carter, bring that fellow here. Will you come, too, and appear against him later in court?"

"That is my desire," returned the New York detective, pushing his way through the crowd with the limp and beaten blackleg, and pitching him into the rear seat, where another burly-looking man, dressed likewise in automobile clothes, caught and held him.

"Hop in! We'll get out of this crowd. The officer will see to the horse."

A policeman was now approaching, as Nick stepped into the tonneau of the car. There were but the two men in it besides himself and the prisoner, and the detective supposed it to be a police machine. At least, the man under the wheel was a person in authority.

"How's that fellow he hit?" demanded Nick anxiously.

"We didn't stop to see," admitted the second stranger. "But an ambulance had been called. He'll be taken care of."

The car was turned into a side street, and began to run as rapidly as was allowable toward another part of the city.

Nick was fairly well acquainted with Baltimore, but they took so many turns and went so fast that he scarcely realized in what direction they were bound.

Besides, he was breathless after his reckless encounter, and was glad to lie back and get his wind again.

The man beside him, who seemed to be a husky fellow, tossed the ratlike chap on the other seat and told him to "stay there!" in a tone that made the blackleg shrink as though from a blow.

"That was a great exhibition of horsemanship and daring, Mr. Carter," said the man under the wheel, looking over his shoulder for an instant.

"We ought to have Mr. Carter here on *our* force," said the other stranger, looking at Nick keenly through his goggles.

"Thank you, gentlemen; but my time is engaged away ahead," and Nick laughed.

"Oh, we could make you a bona-fide offer—something that might cause you to think twice before refusing us," said the man beside him.

The words, and the tone in which they were uttered, struck Nick instantly as peculiar. Was he being invited to leave New York and join the Baltimore police force—or what?

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, gentlemen," he stammered.

"We admire you very much, Mr. Carter," said the man, crowding a bit closer to him. "You are a man who is always there with the goods, and we want such men and are willing to pay for them. *If you want money, don't scorn our offer!*"

Nick stared at him blankly. Then his face began to flush a little.

"I beg your pardon!" he said. "I don't know you. You have the advantage of me——"

"We certainly have—at present!" exclaimed the man. "And we mean to use that advantage."

"What's that?" cried Nick, and half-rose from his seat.

"Look out!" exclaimed the man ahead.

The one beside Nick turned suddenly and thrust his face close into Nick's own, while the little, ratlike man seemed to suddenly awaken, too.

"Have a care, Mr. Nick Carter!" hissed the fellow beside the detective. "We have the advantage of you, as you have just stated. I am pressing the muzzle of a revolver against your side—do you feel it? Don't cry out, or make a break of any kind, if you value your life!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAND OF SHADE.

It didn't take long for Nick to see where he stood—or, rather, where he sat!

The threat of the stranger beside him was no bluff. He felt the hard end of the pistol, and knew that he was entirely unarmed himself.

These were no police. He had been gullible enough to fall into as pretty a trap as could have been set.

"I admit the advantage pointed out," he said, with a grim nod.

"Glad to see you so sensible, Mr. Carter," returned his seat companion, while the shoulders of the man in front shook with laughter. "I hope you'll show a like good sense in further matters."

"Thank you," said Nick. "I try to produce the opinion among those who know me that I am blessed with the element known as 'horse-sense.' In this case I feel that, as I am unarmed, you have the best of the argument."

"Oh, we know you are unarmed, sir," laughed the other.

"Indeed?"

"Otherwise you would not have run from our men below there."

"Ah!"

"We are quite aware of your courage."

"Many thanks!"

"And if you'd had a gun some of those roustabouts would have been punctured—eh?"

"Quite true, sir."

"If not on your own part, for the sake of the other fellow, eh?"

"Meaning the man that this scoundrel, here, rapped on the head?" asked Nick, nodding at the rat-faced man.

"Ah-h, g'wan! I'd like ter have that bottle now. I'd put yer blasted heyes out!" snarled the fellow.

"A lovely temper you have, Jeffers," said the man beside Nick, speaking sharply.

"Aw, I've got it in for that big stiff!"

"That's nice," returned Nick, smiling.

"Blast ye! I'll be even, too. He blame' near scragged me!"

"And it's a pity Mr. Carter didn't!" snapped the man under the wheel, looking back again. "Shut up!"

The ratlike man subsided, snarling under his breath like a whipped cur.

"But I must admit, Mr. Carter, that although we appear to have the advantage of you just now, you seem to have succeeded in putting away somewhere an article that we were desirous of obtaining," and the man with the pistol smiled again.

"Indeed!" ejaculated Nick, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"Oh, Mr. Carter, let us be open and frank with each other."

"By all means! Let's!" drawled Nick.

"You very well know what we are after."

"I give you my word——" began Nick, but was interrupted by the man on the front seat:

"No evasions, Carter! We mean business."

"I am always glad to talk to men who do," said Nick.

"And we will have no fooling," repeated the other.

"Farthest from my intentions, gentlemen. If I get a chance to crack your heads together, you'll not think me in a fooling mood," he added pleasantly.

"Now, *that* is the first foolish thing you've said," declared the man beside him.

"I like to give vent to my feelings once in a while," returned the detective, laughing lightly.

"Come, Mr. Carter, this matter can be settled very quickly and easily——"

"I am glad to hear that."

"And it all lies with you."

"Better and better!"

The other refused to lose his temper, although the man in front swore.

"We want something that you brought off that yacht with you. You seem not to have it now——"

"How observing you people are!" exclaimed Nick.

"But we sha'n't trust to appearances, however."

"No?"

"No, Mr. Carter. The little box—where is it?"

"My—dear—sir!" ejaculated Nick, being sure now that somehow the enemy had missed his visit to the express office, "do you really expect me to tell you that?"

"I do."

"What a hopeful nature yours is!" marveled the detective.

"And good-natured, too, Mr. Carter," laughed the other.

"That is still more commendable."

"I promise you that you cannot ruffle me easily."

"Good!"

"But I'd drop you into a tank of boiling oil with a smile if by so doing I could get what I want," added the other, with a sudden deadly emphasis that Nick had hard work to keep from shuddering at.

There was a steely quality to the fellow's tone that would have shaken the confidence of most men. The scoundrel was, of the three in the automobile, the most dangerous, and Nick instantly realized that fact.

But he was not bound to show them that he feared this man. What he did was to throw back his head and laugh in a most natural and hearty manner.

"My goodness! Did you expect to frighten me by such bunkum?" demanded the detective.

"Not at all," returned the other coolly.

"As a confession regarding your interesting character, it is certainly amusing; but we are not back in the times of the inquisition," said Nick. "I am afraid I shall have to disappoint your curiosity."

"About the little box?"

"Quite so."

"I would be willing to bet you a good deal that you change your mind!" said the man.

"I am not a betting man," returned Nick mildly.

"You found time to pass that box to some friend of yours. We did certainly overlook the chance of your having a partner in waiting for you—and it. But I feel sure," added the fellow with the gun, "that a word from you will place the box in *our* hands."

"I hate to tell you that word will never be spoken, sir," returned Nick emphatically.

"And I am sure it will."

"Never!"

"Never is a long day, Carter."

"So it is. And I hate to have you panting for that little box through all eternity."

The man on the front seat swore again. His temper was not as well under control as that of his partner.

"Yer put a bit o' wire around his blasted t'roat, guvnor, an' pinch it up wi' a pair o' tweezers. That'll bring him to his fodder," declared the ratty man, snarling at Nick.

The man beside the detective exclaimed:

"Stop! Hold up!"

When the man in front, and evidently in surprise, brought the auto to a sharp stop, the other continued:

"Put this scoundrel down, Abe. I won't have him here any longer. He's enough to turn a man's blood cold. Do we owe him anything?"

"Yes, we do!" exclaimed the man in front, fiercely turning on the fellow whom Nick had worked so hard to capture. "We owe him so much that we ought to let him go to jail."

"Don't ye try no tricks, boss!" whined the scamp. "I done wot I thought was right."

"And a deuce of a muss you made of it," admitted the man who held Nick captive.

"Ought to be shot!" grumbled the one under the wheel. "Yes, let him git out! We've brought him far enough for safety."

The ratty man made no objection. He was evidently ill at ease, as it was, in the car. He hopped out, scowling, however.

"Sneak, now," said the driver, as he started the car once more. "I might be able to save you if you were caught; but I'm not sure. The fellow you hit is well known here, and his friends may have a bigger pull than we have."

They left the marooned cockney to work his own salvation, and sped on in the automobile. Nick knew that they were making for the suburbs of the city, but he had little idea of where they were bound. And he saw no chance of making his escape at the present time.

Both of these men were doubtless armed. He was defenseless himself save for his fists, and the situation was not desperate enough to call for the risking of his life.

It was not hard for the detective to guess who these men were. His waking hours for the past four weeks—and his sleep had been disturbed, too—by thoughts of them.

The man under the wheel was without doubt Abe Grout—Abram Grout, the gambler, policy king, ex-bookmaker and racing-tout. The one beside Nick was Paul G. Shade.

These men, in the guise of a Wall Street brokerage concern known as Blaney, Lowell & Co., had "pulled off" several schemes that had won them a mint of money at the expense of other people in the Wall Street game, and especially troubled the other members of the Stock Exchange Association.*

The difficulty was that the association could not prove an infringement of the rules against Blaney, Lowell & Co., and so find grounds for keeping the members of the firm off the floor of the stock exchange.

Abe Grout was supposed to be behind Blaney, Lowell & Co. Paul G. Shade was the working partner in the firm who did all the business with Grout, for the latter never appeared in the offices of the company, which had every appearance of being a respectable concern.

Shade himself, indeed, was traveling about most of the time, but made his home in Washington. It was through Shade that Nick Carter, engaged by Mr. Mark Cameron, secretary of the Stock Exchange Association, had hoped to "get tabs" on the underhand workings of Blaney, Lowell & Co.

Nick had gone to Washington to ferret out the method by which Shade seemed to obtain information regarding certain moves of the administration, and of the higher courts, in advance of the public at large.

A certain case of very recent date was the occasion of Nick's being called into the matter. The superior court had rendered a decision which, for a time, aided certain railroad interests. It was not a permanent victory for the railroads, but naturally the stocks and bonds of those railroads advanced under the impetus of the decision.

Several days before the decision was made public, however, Blaney, Lowell & Co. seemed to have known what the decision was to be. They, and their customers, were up to their necks with agreements to sell at a low price—"selling short," it is called. They covered their sales and made hundreds of thousands on the unexpected advance.

How did Shade obtain his information? That was the question which Nick was set to solve.

And on his arrival in Washington the detective had learned that the members of the New York Stock Exchange Association were not the only persons desirous of having this mystery explained.

While he sat in the lobby of the Blank Hotel, Nick was brought a telegram from Mr. Reginald Pyle, a private secretary of the president, and an odd man of remarkable penetration of mind and much influence with the chief executive, which message requested Nick to call at once on Mr. Pyle at his office.

Such a request, emanating from such a source, was tantamount to a command, and, much puzzled, Nick had obeyed the summons. As he expected, Mr. Pyle introduced him almost immediately into the president's private office.

Through secret service means the president had known of Nick's arrival in Washington, and, likewise, that he was investigating the tricky dealings of Blaney, Lowell & Co.

For a reason entirely different from that which had set Nick on the trail of Paul G. Shade and Abe Grout, the administration desired strongly to know something about those worthies and their dealings—if they had such—with Judge Simon Bernard, one of the chief figures on the supreme court bench.

The president had already planned an additional cabinet department—something of great importance—and had secretly chosen for its head Judge Bernard. In the spring the matter would be placed before congress and the president had wished to nominate Judge Bernard for the secretaryship of this new department.

But there had suddenly risen a question in the mind of the anxious chief executive. The latest exploit of Blaney, Lowell & Co. had made the president suspicious of Judge Bernard himself!

The judge had written the decision in the matter, knowledge of which in advance of publication had enabled Shade, as manager of Blaney, Lowell & Co., to plan the scheme which had netted such big financial results for themselves, and had put so many other Wall Street operators in a hole.

Where was the leak? That was the query in the president's mind. And it was this query that he desired Nick Carter, if possible, to answer.

If Judge Simon Bernard himself, or anybody connected with him, was not strictly honest, he could not

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 616, "Nick Carter's Submarine Clue."

be of use to the administration, and the portfolio of the new cabinet place could not be offered one of the keenest legal minds in the country!

It was a matter of moment to the president, and Nick saw it that way. He had promised to keep his eyes and ears open for anything that might lead him over a trail which would, in the end, lead to Judge Bernard. As he was to follow Shade's movements so closely, there might be a possibility of his stumbling upon just the clue needed to explain the mystery of the leak.

Meanwhile Nick had found masquerading in the hotel, under the guise of an old man and his wife from upper New York State, Shade himself and his niece and secretary, Miss Lora Price. Just the reason for this masquerade Nick was not informed; but he had been tricked by Shade and the girl into a brief captivity, and learned that Shade's intention was to put him—Nick—out of the way for a time, until certain great plans of his and Abe Grout's should be accomplished.

Fate willed otherwise, however, and Nick took command of the yacht *Spoondrift*, belonging to a very dear friend of Lora's, a young Baltimore society man named Ian Campbell—which yacht Shade had borrowed—and sailed down the river to the Chesapeake and Tangier Sound.

Here, on the shore of the sound, a certain queer old fellow, a diver, known as the Water Ferret, was building a sea-wall against the water-front of Mr. Mark Cameron's estate.

This old fellow had overheard and overseen a quarrel between Shade and Abe Grout, in which an important letter signed by Grout himself had been cast into the water.

In trying to rescue the letter it had been beaten under the surface, and later, while below in his suit of armor, the Water Ferret had observed the lost letter held tightly in the grip of a large oyster clinging to the rocky bottom of the Sound.

The Water Ferret had told Nick of the existence of this letter, and how strangely it was held "on file."

Nick had, therefore, come in the *Spoondrift* to the spot, and with the Water Ferret's help recovered the important letter, oyster and all. The yacht then brought him to Baltimore on his way home.

Shade and Grout were evidently aware of the existence of the letter, and knew that Nick had it in the box he had brought ashore. They had laid ample plans to seize the detective and obtain the evidence against them.

Chance—and the young man who had warned him in so timely a manner, and had afterward suffered for the act—had enabled Nick to put the box beyond present recovery of the plotters.

But as for himself—well, he realized that, in this auto, and in the complete control of Grout and Shade, his situation was unenviable, to say the least!

CHAPTER V.

THE RATTLE OF THE SOUNDER.

Having gotten rid of the ratty man, who was evidently merely an understrapper—a menial in their service—Abe Grout and Paul G. Shade seemed more willing to talk openly with the detective.

The fact that the coat, cap, and goggles of the ordinary automobilist would disguise him effectually in his own mother's presence, is excuse enough for Nick's getting so easily caught by these fellows.

But, besides this, he had been in great excitement himself, having just passed through an experience that would have shaken the judgment of most men.

Howbeit, he was caught, and he knew well enough that to try and get away from the two men now spelled death for him!

Abe Grout, Nick had always heard, was known among the gambling fraternity as "a bad man" in the West; but it was whispered that, more than once, personal enemies of Mr. Grout had been removed by the hand of Fate in most sudden and unexplained ways.

Grout had "oodles" of money, and he was willing to spend it like water when he had a special object to accomplish. Nick judged that at least a dozen toughs and blacklegs had been engaged this very day in the attempt to stop him, Nick, and gain possession of the evidence which he had brought off the yacht with him.

Besides, Grout must have had much influence with the police, and *that* cost something. He was a sullen, surly fellow, as Nick saw, and the detective knew that from him, at least, he might expect very brutal treatment if he tempted him too far.

As for Paul G. Shade, he was a more refined villain. There was about him a cold daring—a bold and resourceful wit—that made him by far the more dangerous of the two. Nick had recognized this element in Shade's character before; and it was more firmly impressed upon the detective's mind now.

Quite unruffled in his manner and tone of voice, yet Nick believed that Shade could coolly use the most fiendish methods to bring about his ends. The way in which he had tampered with the innocent mind of his niece, Lora Price, and had used her in his nefarious schemes, was sufficient evidence to prove this fact.

And now Shade had no maid to deal with. He knew that in Nick Carter he had a bitterly stubborn foe. The detective, too, measured Shade with equal wisdom.

"It is a trite but true saying, Mr. Carter," continued Shade soothingly, "that time is money. While we are speeding over these smooth roads in Abe's automobile, can't we come to some agreement?"

"Easiest thing in the world," declared Nick instantly.

Grout looked around with flashing eyes.

"How's that?" he asked eagerly.

But Shade was not so easily fooled. He laughed and said:

"I fancy that reply is not all it appears to be on its face—eh, Mr. Carter?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Nick declared. "We *can* come to an agreement."

"Indeed?"

"And very easy, too!"

"What agreement?" demanded Grout, again glancing back.

"You fellows agree to drop me right here, and I'll stand still and never say a word, or do a thing to harm you, until you are out of sight."

"*What!*" roared the angry Grout, while Shade chuckled.

"That's my first, last, and only offer," declared Nick boldly.

"Confound you! I'd run us all into yonder ditch first!" growled Grout.

"Softly, Abe—softly!" advised Shade.

"Oh, suit yourselves!" said Nick carelessly.

"Undoubtedly you are a past master in the great American game of bluff, Mr. Carter," said Shade easily.

"Thanks!"

"But we are not bluffing."

"No?"

"Most certainly not."

"Then give me credit," urged Nick seriously, "of being as much in earnest as yourselves."

"Then you mean——"

"Exactly what I say."

"But, my dear fellow——"

"I shall make no other offer, no matter how long you fellows hold me. And I may withdraw that if you persist in keeping me captive. Just remember, Mr. Paul G. Shade—and you, too, Grout—when I began the business I am in—the detecting of criminals—I made up my mind to one thing."

"And that——"

"That if I was successful—or wished to be successful—I must count my life as nothing, and gaining my ends as everything. To make any other agreement with you fellows than the one I suggest would be impossible at this stage of the game. That's my last offer. I don't care a flip for my life. The evidence is everything. And the evidence I wanted I have gained, and it will be used, whether I am alive or dead!"

"The rotten scoundrel!" burst forth Abe Grout. "Rap him on the head, P. G.!"

"Not here on the public street, Abe," chuckled Mr. Shade, apparently unruffled by Nick's defiance.

But he turned serious again and began once more with the detective.

"I want to show you, Mr. Carter, how very foolish and unwise your action is. If you consider your life as so invaluable, why don't you get up here and now and make a fight?"

"I don't consider it necessary," returned Nick, quite as amiably as the broker himself.

"But I tell you frankly that if you do not agree to *our* demands you will not only be held in captivity, but you will be tortured until you do the thing we wish."

"Shut up, you fool!" growled Abe.

"Oh, I know Mr. Carter," laughed Shade. "He can stand a threat like that."

"Most certainly," returned Nick coolly.

"Because you think we won't carry it out?" chuckled Shade.

"Hardly."

"No?"

"I have every reason to believe you quite capable of keeping your promise, knowing the kind of men you are."

—"At least you are not uncomplimentary on that point."

"I am not terrified by your threat, however."

"Then you are like the Oriental. It is 'Kismet'—eh?"

"Scarcely."

"Yet the threat of torture does not make you tremble?"

Nick looked him full in the goggles.

"Do I look as though I were trembling?" he demanded, with scorn.

"Well, not so's to be noticeable," admitted Shade grimly.

Nick nodded and smiled enigmatically.

Even Shade began to be ruffled a bit.

"I really believe, Mr. Carter, that you have a fancy that we may be—if not unable to torture you—unwilling to do so?" he asked.

"Not at all."

"Eh?"

"I think you'd both be more than willing to make me suffer."

"Tut, tut!" cried Shade, trying to laugh again.

"I do not believe, Mr. Shade, that even you are as good-natured as you try to appear. I wouldn't be if I were in your place."

"How's that?" and the puzzled Shade scowled a little.

"I am about to cause you a considerable monetary loss—you, and Mr. Grout, and your other blackguard associates. Something is going to drop," said Nick, smiling. "I am telling no secrets. Of course, you know it, otherwise you would not have tried this foolish scheme."

"Shut him up!" roared Abe Grout, turning around in his seat with anger.

"Keep still, Abe, and run the car. Look out or you'll have us in the ditch, after all," said Shade.

Then to Nick he said:

"I'd like really to know what is in your mind, Mr. Carter?"

"If you knew you'd be the most astonished man in seven States!" chuckled the detective.

Grout growled out an oath again. And Shade was shaken.

To himself Nick expressed it that he'd "got them on the run." They were both puzzled by their captive's manner and words. Shade, however, was the cooler of the two scoundrels.

"I fear, Mr. Carter, that you do not realize just how helpless you are," he said, digging the pistol deeper into Nick's side.

"I must say that your delicate attentions would keep any man from forgetting his situation," retorted Nick.

"And yet you defy us?"

"Put it that way if you wish."

"A bold man, Mr. Carter, should be cautious, too."

"True."

"Then have a care."

"But what am I to gain by caution?"

Shade was undeniably puzzled.

"I am sure you gain nothing by underestimating your danger, Mr. Carter," he said grimly, at last.

"I don't underestimate it."

"What then?"

"Why, it is you who do the underestimating," and Nick chuckled again.

"I declare! you have the advantage of *me* now."

"And the time is coming when that will be as true a word as ever you spoke," proceeded the detective lightly. "Fortune's wheel is bound to turn."

"Oh, pshaw! if you are depending on chance!" began Shade.

"The fellow's stringing us, or trying to," growled Grout.

"Never was more in earnest in my life," said Nick solemnly. "I have confidence that the time is coming when the advantage is going to be on my side—and you'll both admit it."

"And I suppose it will save your life, eh?" demanded Shade, with sudden viciousness.

Nick looked him steadily in the eye for several seconds. Of course, the goggles and mask hid Shade's face, but he finally laughed a little nervously.

"Want me to repeat that, Mr. Carter?" he asked.

"Possibly you may contemplate being my murderer in the end, Mr. Shade," said Nick sternly. "It cannot be an entertaining contemplation, however. And I am not going to answer your question. Let time do that."

His manner and words actually closed the man's mouth. He said nothing for some time, but watched Nick sharply.

The motor-car had brought them outside the city by now. Houses were scarce and pedestrians few. Soon their own vehicle was the only one on the road, as far as Nick could see in either direction.

"Better do it here," Grout said, looking around and scowling at Nick.

"All right," said Shade.

Then he recovered some of his spirits and squinted at the detective with a laugh.

"Sounds gruesome, doesn't it?"

"My curiosity *is* aroused, I admit," returned Nick, holding himself well in hand, for he did not know just what the two villains might be planning to do to him.

"I do not consider the time for harsh measures has arrived, Mr. Carter," Shade said pleasantly. "But if you are determined to make us use force, we can easily overcome you, or shoot. Do you understand?"

"Quite."

"Then, will you be reasonable?"

"Explain yourself, Mr. Shade."

"I can hold you under my loaded gun while Abe ties you, hand and foot. Then we can easily blindfold you. Do you see?"

"I wouldn't if I were blindfolded, would I?" said Nick, with a smile.

"You have guessed it exactly. We wish to blindfold you."

"So I shall not see where you take me?"

"Exactly."

"Go ahead."

"You will remain tractable?"

"Surest thing you know!" declared Nick easily.

"That's good," said Shade, taking him immediately at his word and laying down the gun.

"Just keep your gun pointed this way, Abe," he added to his partner.

Grout had already brought the car to a stop. He knelt on the front seat and leveled another pistol at Nick's heart. There was absolutely no sense in the detective's putting up a fight.

And in a minute or two Shade had done the job. Nick was completely blindfolded and Shade's own mask was slipped over his face to hide the bandage from inquisitive passers-by.

Then they went on again, and Nick had no knowledge of the way now. But occasionally Shade punched the pistol-muzzle into his side so that he should not forget that he was being faithfully guarded.

Grout put up the speed-clutch, and the way they sailed over the ground proved one thing to Nick, at least—they were traveling through a strictly rural community.

Otherwise he had no knowledge of where he was being taken. It was already past noon, and they had been traveling an hour and a half before he was blindfolded. Another two hours dragged by and Nick was pretty hungry and thirsty.

"I see, Mr. Shade, that you did not deceive me in the least," he remarked to his seatmate, who had been glumly silent for some miles.

"How's that?" demanded the other, starting up.

"You said I should be tortured. I fancy the torturing process has begun, hasn't it? This is a taste of the Desert of Sahara and the last Indian famine, rolled into one, isn't it?"

"Oh, thunder! Hungry and thirsty, are you? Well, you're not alone in that. It's two hours past my

lunch-time, and I couldn't do a thing to a cold bottle—eh, Abe?"

"We're most there," grunted Abe.

"Dear! dear!" murmured Nick. "And so near a place where cold bottles will be possible? Why, I fancied we were at least seven miles from a lemon!"

"Don't you fret," growled Shade. "The cold bottles will not be for *you*, Mr. Carter, unless you listen to reason."

Indeed, Mr. Paul G. Shade was rapidly becoming as irritable as his friend Mr. Grout. And as the temper of the man sourèd, so did Nick's cheerfulness increase.

This very cheerfulness and coolness was what disturbed Shade—and disturbed him a whole lot!

He could not guess what Nick had up his sleeve—if anything; and an uncertainty is never pleasant.

These men, who had captured the detective, were running their necks into a noose, perhaps; and not knowing fully what to expect, the thought bothered them.

If Nick's cheerfulness and his half-veiled threats were merely bluff, he carried it so well that Shade himself had been annoyed by the attitude of the captive.

The plotters evidently determined to keep on with the scheme they had hatched out against Nick. The auto rattled on for some time farther, and then Nick realized by the sound and motion that they had left the road and were rolling over some grassy way.

It was not very rough, yet it was plain that it could not be a regular road they were traversing. The swish of tree branches on either side was plain in his ears, too. The automobile seemed to be pushing through a more or less dense thicket.

Suddenly there was a startling eruption of sound just ahead of them—the baying and barking of some half-dozen dogs. Although Nick could not see them, he knew by their notes what breed they were.

The cross-bred German and Cuban bloodhound has a cry like nothing else under the sun—bloodthirsty enough to raise any man's hair from his scalp in fear.

These brutes were evidently clamoring because of the arrival of the auto near their habitation. And by the rattling of chains and savage bays, Nick was assured that they must be dangerous brutes and were now held in leash.

The auto rolled out upon a graveled space and stopped.

"Come on! Take him in!" commanded Grout.

Shade put up his gun, it seemed, for he grabbed Nick by the elbow and helped him out. The detective was glad to stretch his legs, and said so.

"And I'm hanged if I wouldn't like to stretch your neck!" ejaculated Abe Grout.

"My! but you are in a pleasant mood," said his comrade, with a laugh. "Come into the house, Nick Carter."

The bandage was not whisked off his eyes until the detective was in a dark hall. There he could see but little, for the windows of the house seemed all to be shuttered.

But there were people in it besides themselves. Nick heard voices and footsteps above. And then he heard a familiar sound—a rattle which is usually heard in the busy marts of trade instead of in such out-of-the-way places as this house must be.

It was the rattle of the telegraph-sounder. The noise could not be mistaken, for Nick could hear it plainly—indeed, being no poor operator himself, he could read extracts of the Morse as it was tapped on the receiving instrument.

"There is surely something doing here," thought the detective. "Telegraph-instruments do not rap out messages in abandoned houses. What am I up against now?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOUNDS.

Shade broke in upon Nick's cogitations with a jocose remark. He was evidently trying to recover his usual mood.

"Welcome home, Mr. Carter!" he said, with a cackle. "Hope you'll like it here."

"Does it much matter whether I like it or no?" asked Nick, blinking in the lamplight of the hall.

"Well, according to your statements, you will stay here some time. It would be too bad if you didn't like your quarters."

"Just so. How about you? I presume you will remain to watch me?"

"Oh, not necessarily," returned Shade airily. "Come right up-stairs. I reckon I can find other means of keeping you in bounds than watching you myself."

Nick did not balk, but followed him. The upper hall was well lighted and Shade entered an apartment near the top of the flight. It was a comfortably furnished room, although the arrangements were old-fashioned.

"There may be some dust about," said Shade. "This room hasn't been slept in recently. The house is, as you can see, rather out of order and not well cared for."

"Can we have a little air?" asked Nick, finding the place stuffy enough.

"Oh, certainly! I see that you wish to look out and view the surrounding landscape," and Shade laughed.

Without taking the pains to blow out the light, he went to a window, flung open the wooden shutters, raised the sash, and, with a little key that he took from his pocket, unlocked the padlock which fastened the chain of the heavy outside shutters.

When he flung back the outer shutters the sun and air poured in.

"I fancy you did not expect just *this* view," chuckled Shade, standing aside for Nick to look out.

Really, what the detective saw was not encouraging. He was at the back of the house and the window over looked a yard surrounded by a high brick wall. Be-

yond the wall he saw forest trees—nothing more. The house seemed to have been built in the primeval wood.

And the yard itself—merely a court—was not promising—graveled and hard, and sunny, not a tree or a leaf of grass in it; not even fowls, or birds about.

But there was life in the yard; not remarkably attractive life, though!

There were six big kennels, and chained before each was one of the savagest dogs Nick had ever beheld.

All six rose up and howled when the two men appeared at the window. Their red eyes and slobbering jaws suggested anything but pleasant anticipations.

"If you lack company at any time—drop down and see them," said Shade, and began laughing again. "Handsome creatures, aren't they?"

"Very," returned Nick grimly, determined not to show any fear.

"I fancy you see my point?" pursued Shade, closing the shutters again and locking them, but leaving the window open. "I do not have to stay here to watch you."

"I see," admitted Nick, but made no further comment.

Shade went out, carefully locking the door behind him. After a time, however, he brought back a tray on which was a bowl of ice-cold milk and a loaf of bread.

"Your dungeon fare, Mr. Carter," he remarked, trying to be facetious again.

"Fit for the gods!" Nick declared, sitting down to the repast at once. "Ah, Mr. Shade! this does not look like torture."

"All in good time, Mr. Carter—all in good time," returned the other, as he departed again.

Nick was left strictly alone for the remainder of the afternoon. And he spent most of the time in sleep.

He knew that he was well fastened in the room and that there were several persons in the house. Of what use would be an attempt to escape by daylight?

Besides, the dogs in the back court were too broad a hint to go unnoticed. He knew if he managed to get away from the house, the six savage beasts would be put upon his trail.

They were bred not alone to follow a scent, but to *hold* when they reached their prey. The house he was confined in doubtless was some old-fashioned mansion deep in the woods. He would have a long stretch of unsettled country to pass through before arriving at any place of better refuge than a tree.

To try and get out of the window must be worse than foolish anyway, for the dogs would be roused in the court below and give tongue.

If he succeeded in making his escape from the house at all, it would have to be by passing through some other rooms.

To this end, when his watch told him that it was evening, the detective began to move softly about his prison, examining the walls and doors for the easiest means of egress.

The house had been built at a time when timber was cheap. The beams and joists protruded into the room, and were papered over with some gaudy modern paper—a profanation, Nick considered it.

But these sound walls did not promise much ease in the escape line. Nevertheless, they were not soundproof, for Nick heard all the time noises in other rooms and sometimes the murmur of voices and the clicking of the telegraph-instruments.

This puzzled him, too. Such a building as this should have had such thick walls that no slight sound should penetrate them.

There were three doors leading out of the room—one into the hall, one into some other apartment from which he never heard a sound, and a smaller one which doubtless gave entrance to a clothes-closet built in beside the great chimney.

After some prowling about the detective learned that the clearer noises he heard appeared to come from this closet. At least, by listening at the narrow door he could distinguish some words being spoken by parties on the other side, and the rattle of the telegraph-sounder was quite plain.

He figured the explanation out without much trouble. The instrument was in this next room, and people sat there. There was a closet adjoining the one in his own room, and the partition between the two was thin. That was the reason for the sounds being so plain in this corner.

He had put his light out on rising from the bed, so that if there were any prying eyes peering through peep-holes that he could not find, they would not see much of his movements. He had already learned his way around his prison in the dark, and had removed his shoes on lying down, so that he now made no sound over the carpeted floor.

The voices and other sounds beyond the closet tempted Nick extremely. He had an overpowering curiosity to know what his captors were about—and what they said.

He tried the closet door softly. It was, of course, locked. He did not expect to gain his desire with ease.

He had not been searched by Shade, despite that gentleman's threat which had hinted at this indignity. It was plain that the plotters believed Nick had disposed of the letter they desired so to obtain, and would not be foolish enough to carry it about with him, when Nick was well aware that they were after him for it.

And they were right there. They had been correct when they considered the box Nick carried ashore from the *Spoondrift*, as containing the submarine clue. The one slip-up which Shade and Abe Grout had made was not in discovering what Nick had really done with the box.

For a few moments the detective had succeeded in getting out of the sight of the arch-plotters and their henchmen. They had not seen him enter or leave the express company's office.

However, that was not to the point now. Nick's thoughts were on other matters.

He desired to pick the lock of this closet door, and he was glad he had not been searched by his captors. Otherwise the skeleton keys and ingenious tools he carried at all times would have been discovered and confiscated.

It might be dangerous for Nick to leave the house, even could he escape. Unless he had a long start before his escape was discovered, the hounds would surely run him down.

But with the tools he possessed, and plenty of time at his disposal, Nick believed he could pick any lock in the whole mansion!

He now crept across the room, found some breadcrumbs left from his meal, and a little moisture in the bottom of the milk-bowl. He molded the bread into dough and, going to the hall door and the one leading into the other room, stuffed both keyholes with the paste he made. He would be sure that nobody would look through those apertures, at any rate!

Then he drew with infinite caution a heavy piece of furniture across both doors—they opened into the room—so as to retard the sudden entrance of any of his keepers.

These obstructions would give him time to get away from his work, if disturbed before the lock was picked.

If anybody came, however, and insisted on entering, Nick knew that a search would instantly be made for the meaning of the barricade. They would, of course, suspect him of seeking to escape.

"It would be a pity to disappoint them, too," murmured the wily detective.

Therefore, he drew forth another instrument from a concealed pocket in the lining of his coat. It was a saw of finest tempered steel, and with the aid of a drop of oil to keep it from squeaking, he soon had scratched a furrow across one of the links of the chain that held the outside shutters, as though his object was to get out of the window.

He then laid the saw on the window-sill and went at his real task. With a wire, and finally with the regular picklock, he managed after some time to push back the tongue in the lock of the closet door. Had it not been rusted from disuse it would have taken him less time to do this.

When he finally opened the door, he looked into a black, musty-smelling hole.

The closet had probably not been opened in months —perhaps years. Nick felt around it and found that the hooks and the shelves above were entirely empty saving for dust on the latter and on the floor.

The instant he opened the door, the sounds beyond became plainer. The closet was only a little over two feet deep. Nick scratched a match softly and made out that the end wall farthest from the chimney was of narrow, matched pine.

This closet did not fill half the space between the chimney and the outer wall of the house. There, as the detective suspected, another closet like it, opening out of the other room. The door of that closet was probably open, and now there was only the thin board partition between his ear and all the sounds that were made in the other room.

The situation made eavesdropping, at least, very possible.

CHAPTER VII.

OVER THE WIRE.

Nobody came to the doors of Nick's prison, and, after listening for a moment, he stepped into the closet and put his ear to the wooden partition.

The rattle of the sounder had, for the moment, ceased.

"You are bound to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, P. G., and that I'll swear to!"

The voice was Abe Grout's, and, to Nick's surprise, it sounded actually whiney!

It showed what a great interest Shade had over even the gambler. He certainly was a brainy man, and when a fellow of Paul G. Shade's mental caliber, with his influence over other human creatures, starts out to be a crook, he is mighty resourceful and likewise dangerous!

Society can protect itself in a great measure from the thug and the thief and the ordinary brutal burglar; but men like Shade are an entirely different proposition.

Grout's tone told the story of some long discussion which was resulting in the other carrying his point and overriding Abe Grout's objections.

"I'm not wishful of killing our good business, Abe, any more than yourself. But I know that there must be an end some day, and——"

"You see it coming?"

"Precisely."

Grout blasphemed with a weak man's vehemence.

"You're doing all this yourself! You've got other schemes up your sleeve that you're not letting me in on! By Heaven, P. G., I may not be as sharp to see ahead as you are, but I can see well enough when I'm *done*. And no man ever welched on me that didn't suffer for it afterward."

"Oh, shucks, Abe! You sound like a common blackguard when you talk that way."

"Then, by thunder, I *am* a common blackguard. You're an *un*-common one I admit. But I'll not be done by you!"

"Haven't I served you faithfully?" demanded Shade, with some heat himself now.

"You have—at so much per cent.," snarled Grout.

"Why beef about it? You got your share, and I got mine."

"And now you're going to throw me over and go it on your own hook, I suppose you think?"

"Well, suppose I should?"

"And, by thunder!" cried Grout, tapping the table by which he evidently sat, "I say you shan't."

"Don't take that tone with me, Abe. It isn't clubby," observed Shade, chuckling.

"I mean what I say!"

"And I am quite as positive. I'll pull off this last thing for you——"

"And then leave me to flounder about while you take the money you've made off of me and go in and rig the market for a killing—that's your game, is it?"

"Your foolishness makes me tired, Abe!" ejaculated Shade, with sudden impatience. "I tell you, there is not going to be another chance to make a killing—not in our way."

"Why not, I'd like to know?"

"We'll be watched too closely. Let me tell you that; too many people are interested in our little game. The last turn we made pretty near finished us."

"Why, you double-dyed ass!" roared Grout. "We made a quarter of a million!"

"We did, indeed. It was a great victory," said Shade, with a sneer. "And another such victory would have ruined us completely. We stirred up the wrong bulldog *that* time."

"Heh?"

"The man at the White House."

"Well? What is he more than any other president?" growled Grout.

"He takes a sight of interest in fellows like us just at present. Wall Street is going to be watched more closely than ever before. And *that* turn we did attracted somebody else to us, too."

Evidently Shade gestured toward the room in which Nick Carter was imprisoned, for Grout laughed harshly, as he said:

"Ha! Well, we've got Mr. Nick Carter, all right, all right! *He* is not troubling your gentle soul, is he?"

Shade was silent a moment and then spoke slowly and with strange emphasis:

"He is, indeed. He *is* troubling me. I must confess, Abe, that that fellow is my sole reason for—as you call it—killing the goose that has laid golden eggs for us."

"What!"

"I mean what I say."

"Why, you blamed idiot! Are you dippy? *We've got Nick Carter!*"

"And he's got us."

"Ha! What good will that discovery of his do him? He's here—we've got him, I say!"

"And I'm not so sure of that!"

"By thunder! I am," declared Grout, with satisfaction. "And he could be put where the dogs won't bite him, and nobody be the wiser—just with a turn of my hand."

"Perhaps."

"Aw, pshaw!" cried Grout. "What are you harping on? He's no different from other men. And I've gotten rid of them before."

"Great Scott, man! Could you walk in there and——"

"Drop it! Did I say I would? But there's them that would if I said so," declared Grout grimly.

Shade was silent, and the other pursued his subject:

"And I don't say that's necessary. But while we have Nick in our power, what can he do to harm us?"

"I don't know."

"There you go again! Talking like an idiot."

"I know the fellow is resourceful. That letter of yours is still in existence——"

"Which isn't my fault," added Grout, with emphasis.

"And not mine. But we won't discuss that point. Nick has it——"

"Not on him!"

"No, no! We knew very well he had it in that box. What he did with the box is what puzzles me."

"He had a confederate——"

"Not——" Shade began eagerly, then stopped. "No! I don't understand that person's interference at all. And it's one of the things that puzzles and worries me. We are getting to close quarters."

"But with Nick shut up here——"

"He may, just as he intimated, have something up his sleeve. He's the very devil and all for strategy, they say."

"And you're willing to give up hundreds of thousands for fear of a man who's already in our power—whom we could crush like a flea!"

"Put it that way if you like," and Shade spoke gloomily.

"I don't believe you!" roared Grout. "You're up to some trickery."

"I don't want you to keep repeating that, Abe."

"I suppose it hurts your feelings—you're so honest," sneered the gambler.

"No. But *your* feelings will be hurt, and that's no lie!" snapped Shade, losing his temper momentarily.

"Don't talk like a child. I know you, Shade. And you are up to some trick."

"For the first time since you've known me, Abe, I am not up to any trick."

"Bah!"

"I suppose it is no more than I deserve. I have a reputation for clothing my acts with a mantle of deceit. Now, when I am trying to be perfectly honest with you, I am disbelieved."

"Aw, let it go at that!" scoffed Grout.

"But I am going to finish what I had to say. And you can believe, or not, just as you please. I am going to quit the game. I feel that we shall never pull off another trick successfully. Indeed, if you hamper me much more, I shall begin to feel doubts of *this* one, and then you can run it alone," declared Shade firmly. "I am going to get out of the business, and out of the country. I have promised Lora——"

"Pshaw! Lora!" sneered Grout. "Don't spring any fatherly affection gag——"

"Be still!" commanded Shade, with passion. "The girl is nothing to you, and I have kept her away from

you. She's worth her weight in gold. I *do* feel condemned sometimes in the way I've used her in our business. And now I'm going to stop before something happens that puts the jail-mark on her!"

"Oh, pah!" ejaculated Grout, in fierce disgust.

"I *am*. Besides, this happening to-day has taught me a lesson. Do you know who that fellow was who got black-jacked by that ratty friend of ours?"

"Oh, I know him—young ass!"

"Well, because of *him* I'm going to quit."

"I'm hanged if I understand you, P. G.!"

"Just take me at my word. Believe what I say. I'll engineer this one last game——"

He halted. The telegraph-sounder began to call a number insistently.

"There!" gasped Grout.

"It's come," responded Shade, with some excitement.

He evidently went to the telegraph-instrument, for Nick in the closet heard a finger tapping "What is it?" in staccatto time.

There was an interchange of signals, evidently for the purpose of making sure at either end of the wire that the right parties were in communication.

Nick did not burden his mind with these signals. They were too complicated to be of use, anyway, and the detective was more interested in what followed.

He was a good sound-reader, and nothing escaped him that came over the wire. Still, for a few moments after the message was received and Shade and Grout were whispering over it, the real meaning of it all did not impress Nick Carter's mind.

Then suddenly the thing flashed into his mind in its full and complete meaning. He was so startled that he must have made some untoward sound in the closet.

"What the devil's that?" ejaculated Grout.

"I heard nothing," declared Shade.

"Well, *I* heard it," the other repeated, and Nick heard him cross the floor swiftly.

The detective feared that he was going to be visited. He tiptoed silently out of the closet, closed the door softly, and with the wire locked it.

Scarcely had he done so when the key turned in the hall door and somebody threw a sturdy shoulder against the barricaded door.

CHAPTER VIII.

A VENTURE.

The obstruction to his captors' entrance proved a good thing for Nick. It gave him just the time he needed for full and ample preparation for their visit.

He whipped off his coat and vest, lit the oil-lamp, and seated himself by the table as Grout, reenforced by Shade, toppled over the high secretary that Nick had stood against the door, and forced their way into the room.

"Well! he's all right," said Shade, with relief.

"There's something wrong here, I know," growled Grout, and he crossed instantly to the table and put his hand on the lamp-shade.

"Just as I thought," he snarled. "It hasn't warmed up yet. He's only just this instant lit his lamp."

"What the devil you been doing in here, Carter?" demanded Shade. "Don't act like a child. You can't get out of here to save your soul!"

"By thunder! look at this," exclaimed Grout, suddenly making for the open window.

Shade stood between the detective and the door, and his pistol was in his hand.

"What's doing?" he asked.

"Enough I say! Why! the fool has been trying to saw through this chain. And here's the saw!"

"Serves us right. We should have searched him," declared Shade.

"Well, who'd have thought he was a walking tool-kit. Come on!" said Grout, approaching the detective, "you'll be searched now."

"And don't make any trouble for Mr. Grout, either," commanded Shade, waving his pistol threateningly.

"Bless your heart!" chuckled Nick, "I'm as mild as milk. Do I look like I wanted to hurt you fellows?"

"Aw, shut up!" commanded the gambler, and he began to examine Nick's coat and vest. "Stand up there and take off your clothes."

"What! All of them?" demanded Nick, smiling grimly.

"Peel off and don't have any words about it," growled Grout.

"My, my! how rough you are," said Nick, still smiling, as he arose to comply.

They forced him to strip down to his very skin—even to turn his socks inside out. But most of the articles they found in his clothes were returned to him, although Grout insisted on keeping his knife.

"That will sure bring you bad luck, Mr. Grout," laughed Nick. "A knife is said to cut friendship, and I'd hate to think that you and I should have a falling out."

Grout growled an oath and looked up from a yellow slip that he had been perusing, and which he had found in Nick's wallet.

"What day is this, P. G.?"

Shade told him the day of the week.

"I mean the date?"

"Oh!" returned his comrade, and told him.

"By thunder! what's this mean? This receipt says that a package was shipped to-day with Wells-Fargo to Nicholas Carter, New York. What do you think of *that?* The fellow wasn't half an hour off the yacht when we picked him up."

Shade came nearer and reached for the paper. But he still kept an eye on Nick and his pistol ready.

"What's this mean?" he cried, scowling over the paper at the prisoner.

Nick could not keep down his risibilities at that. He burst into a shout of laughter.

"What the devil's got into the fool?" growled Grout.

"Kick him!" commanded Shade.

But there was a look in Nick's eye that restrained the gambler from following this advice. Nick's muscular body, displayed to the finest advantage in his underclothing, had impressed Grout deeply.

"How comes he to have a paper like that?" urged Grout, still puzzled.

"Why! he's sent a package to himself, of course. And, by Jove! *it's the very thing we wanted, Abe!*"

Nick's merriment assured them that the guess was correct.

"While you fellows have been to the trouble and expense of capturing me and bringing me here," the detective said, when he got his breath again, "the article you were so sure you would make me give up was already on its way to New York. It was delivered to my house—or will be within a short time—to-night, too, and my partners there will know what to do with it. I told you gentlemen that the advantage would be my way yet, and I was right, eh? What do you think?"

"By heavens, P. G.! He's done us!" gasped Grout.

He stuck his hand behind him and half-drew from his hip the pistol which he carried. Nick knew that he had probably seldom been nearer to death than he was that moment. Murder stared out of Abe Grout's eyes at him.

But there was a wide streak of yellow in the gambler, too; and it saved Nick Carter's life at that moment.

He was afraid to shoot!

Grout had hired desperadoes to do his dirty work for him; he could not do it himself. Besides, Shade suddenly interfered.

"Come away, Abe. I want to talk with you," he said, scowling quite as viciously as his fellow plotter at the detective.

"I've a good mind——"

"You've nothing of the sort—it's an evil mind," interrupted Shade. "Come away."

They went out, closing and locking the door after them. Nick proceeded to set up the heavy old desk, and brace it with a chair, before he finished dressing. The murmur of voices had begun in the other room, and he hurried his toilet, dug his hidden tools out from under the carpet's edge, and opened the closet door once more.

But Shade and Grout were talking in very low tones now. They seemed to have lost confidence in their boasted security. Nick could hear very little of what they said.

Yet he understood enough of what went on behind that thin board partition to understand that Shade and Grout were planning for this final raid on the stock-market. And with the message which had just come over the wire in his mind, Nick realized that the plans of the stock-gamblers must be eminently successful.

That message, from somebody in Washington, had told of a contemplated move by the administration against certain corporate interests that would certainly send the dishonestly inflated stocks of those said interests tumbling to the bottom of the coal-chute!

In two days there would be another flurry in the Street, and *somebody* would make money, while others lost! Plans were being laid right here for Blaney, Lowell & Co. to bear the market heavily, purchasing these particular stocks for delivery in a few days, and in this way they could double, yes, quadruple their money.

The plan was simple; the thing about it that was marvelous was how the tricksters learned the news thirty-six hours before it was made public officially.

Up to this point Nick Carter had been troubled very little regarding his situation. He did not mind much being in supposed captivity.

Shade and Grout were certainly dangerous men, and had he not been so excited at the moment when they tricked him into getting into their automobile, he never would have "fallen" so easy to their game; but he believed all the time that he could learn more by going along peaceably with them than by putting up a fight and possibly having his head blown off—and to no good, at that.

Through their underground system of obtaining information, they were planning another trick that would set Wall Street—and the financial world generally—"by the ears."

The idea bred twin thoughts in Nick's active brain. And those same thoughts became, in short, two decisions that the detective swore to himself to fulfil.

But before either could be accomplished, there was another thing to do—and not so easy a matter at that. He must escape from this mansion, and, wherever it chanced to be, find his way to Baltimore—and this before the morning. It was already late into the evening.

But he could do nothing toward escape while Shade and Grout were in that next room. They were busy over plans and messages now. Later Shade—Nick knew it was Shade, for in first "reckoning up" of the

man he had learned that he was once an expert telegrapher and had done some great "stunts" in the old days—sent the messages over the wire. But they were in a cipher that Nick could not easily discover.

Not that it mattered. The detective was confident that he knew their import. Shade was communicating with the New York partners who would do the actual work entailed in this scheme of cornering the stocks in question.

By some means Shade and Grout had found the telegraph company amendable to their desires, and these private wires to the old house were probably a source of heavy revenue to the telegraph people.

Nick remained in the closet all the time, his ear for the most part pressed to the wooden partition. He desired, if possible, to learn where the two men would spend the remainder of the night, and if they would make him another visit. He was not anxious to see them again—no, indeed!

And while he stood there, thinking as to the method to be followed to make good his escape—without being eaten up by the hounds in the court!—it crossed his anxious mind that the very partition against which he leaned was really the thinnest barrier between him and freedom!

And the thought suggested another. In this old house—built perhaps before the Civil War—how should there be such a partition as this even between two closets.

"Why!" thought the detective, "it's doubtful if the sawmills turned out such stuff in those days. This is surely a modern wall.

"Yet there must have been a good, thick wall here originally. Each of these rooms was doubtless a chamber, and each had its own closet. There would not likely have been any reason for having a secret passage between them in the beginning.

"And if the wish had been to make the rooms connect when the house was built, a proper door would have been set into the wall on the other side of the chimney-piece.

"No, no. This was an afterthought. The original partition was cut away—for what? Well, that hardly matters at this stage of the game.

"But why, when once opened, should the wall have been closed again? That's the question which bothers me," thought the detective.

Not idly, but with scarcely a well-defined reason, his fingers began to creep about the edges of the wooden wall where it joined the plaster and lath partitions.

Almost at once he felt a crack straight down the woodwork. The narrow boards were laid horizontally and this crack betokened but one thing.

"That's a door. And once a door, it must be opened in some manner. Give me a few minutes, and a chance to light a match, and I'll see if the said door cannot be opened," he thought.

He dared do nothing toward proving his supposition now, however. But soon the conference between Shade and Grout broke up.

When they moved about the other room again, they began to speak louder.

"What will we do about that blasted Carter, eh?" asked Grout.

"He'll not get out till morning, anyway."

"He won't get out by sawing the shutters open, of course——"

"And if he did, what good would it do him? The dogs would eat him alive. They're loose in the court. I saw to that."

"Well, he tried."

"And it puzzles me why he did it. I fancied he'd have more sense," said Shade gloomily. "I tell you, Abe, I'm not satisfied in my mind about him. He let us find that saw too easily."

"Well, shall we call in the men to watch him?"

"I'll do better. I'll draw a cot across his door and lie down there myself till morning. You're sleeping in that other room, and surely you wouldn't let him get past you?"

"Not much I wouldn't!" admitted Grout.

There was some other conversation, but of no importance. Nick heard Shade, or the other, blow out the lights. The faint odor of smoking oil-wicks reached his nostrils through the partition.

He scurried back into his prison. He had put out his own light, and now he waited in the darkness while he heard some sort of a bed being dragged across the hall and set up by the door of the room in which he was confined. A little later silence fell, and he knew that Grout had retired to his chamber, and that Shade himself had lain down on the couch.

"And what with the dogs outside; and the dogs inside, I reckon I'll be safe till morning, all right, if it wasn't for this inside way," thought the detective, approaching the closet again.

His movements made less noise than the mice that squeaked behind the wainscoting. He had wax matches that did not crackle. His captors had not deprived him of his match-box.

He lit two before he learned that the partition was not a door on hinges, and with a latch. It was merely a movable partition, and a certain lifting and pushing motion dislodged it. Without a sound he passed into the darkness of the other closet and waited to close the barrier before venturing farther.

He might be forced to come back to the prison, or he might not. This was merely a trial he was making. But he believed that, if he could get downstairs, and into the front of the mansion, he might escape without human interference at least.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PEPPER-SHAKER.

Something Grout had said led Nick Carter to believe that there was nobody in the house but himself, Shade, and the "prisoner." Grout had asked if he should call in the men to watch their captive, and Nick figured that there were outbuildings where the employees slept. Perhaps there was a night-watchman, too; but the detective believed that *he* must be on the outside of the mansion as well.

At least he would try a trip through the lower regions, for Nick was not one to sit down when there was a chance for activity to pay.

The room where he had heard the telegraph-sounder was dark, as he expected. The door of this other closet was ajar, and that was how he had come to hear so plainly.

He pushed it wide open and stepped into the other room.

A shutter was open here, and the starlight made it possible for him to make out the dim outlines of objects. Besides, he had been so long in the pitch-dark that this seemed quite well illuminated to him.

The floor was not carpeted here. There were several benches and armchairs. He saw more than one instrument, too.

"This is a regular station," thought the detective. "I reckon the gang keep more than one operator here. They must do some great old business. But just what it is puzzles me.

"Why should they want this half-way house between New York and Washington? I don't see through it. I swear I don't.

"Why don't they send their messages right through to their Wall Street offices? Why not use a cipher? It would be just as secret, wouldn't it?"

These queries, mentally expressed, naturally had no answer. Making sure that nobody was stirring, he walked softly to the door and entered the hall.

Heavy breathing farther along the passage warned him that if he went forward he would stumble over Mr. Shade, sleeping the sleep of the more or less just outside the "prison" door. So he turned toward the back of the house.

There was a turn in the passage, and it was dark. But he went cautiously and found the head of the flight leading down into the rear rooms—the servants' flight.

Down he made his way, a hand before him and his feet feeling the steps carefully ere he trusted his weight upon them. At the bottom was a door.

After listening he unlatched this and pushed it open cautiously. Here were no unshuttered windows. The place was as black as Erebus.

Nick ventured in, however, and closed the door behind him before scratching another match. When it flared up he found himself in a pantry, out of which opened two doors.

One he rightly supposed to lead into the kitchen. He did not wish to go that way. If he made any disturbance in the back of the house the hounds in the yard might give tongue. So he tried the other door.

And as he opened it his hand struck against several small articles on the dresser beside it. He felt of them a second time and then, with sudden forethought, seized on one, smelled of it, and put it hastily in his pocket.

He entered the dining-room, a long and heavily furnished place, as he found. And that it was used at times and some cooking and serving of meals was done here in the house, Nick had no doubt.

But all the windows were tightly shuttered. Like enough it was the general impression of the country-side that this old mansion was not occupied.

"Probably the negroes' shacks near-by are supposed to house all the men that work on the place. Easy enough to run some secret business like this in an abandoned neighborhood. And the hounds would keep off inquisitive callers.

"Well, the question that now confronts me is about those same hounds. Can they get to the front of the house? If I can escape by the front door will I be met by the open jaws of some of those same brutes—and me without the sign of a weapon?"

But he was already determined to assume the risk. Nick was no longer willing to sit idle and let matters take their course

He had a great scheme in his head and was willing to take some considerable risk to carry the plan through. And first of all he must get out of the hands of these enemies.

A match helped him through the dining-room into the big front hall. At the bottom of the stairway he listened again and actually heard Shade snoring.

"Safe as a church, that's sure!" muttered Nick, and went boldly to the front door.

It was chained and locked. The chain had no padlock, however, and the only fastening that really troubled the detective was the main one on the door.

It was of the old-fashioned variety, and could have been picked by an old woman with a pair of scissors. The weight of its bolt, however, was of some consequence. Nick spent some few minutes before he properly manipulated the thing.

He then unlatched it and pulled it toward him cautiously. It jarred a bit on the big hinges, and the detective used his tiny oil-cup again. The oil was doubly refined watch-oil, and after a few moments it soaked into the crevices and the heavy door swung back on the big hinges without a sound.

Not that Nick wanted it to swing far. He opened it just wide enough for it to afford him egress, and, once outside, he closed it immediately.

He was taking no small chance in so doing. If one of those bloodhounds came nosing around the corner of the house, he would have been in a perilous place indeed!

There was no sound from the rear of the mansion, however. In fact, the dogs were shut into the court behind the house.

The moonlight showed Nick nothing in sight to obstruct his sight for some hundreds of yards. Then intervened a hedge between this open space and what lay beyond—a thick hedge of some evergreen tree.

There was no sign of a watchman, and had there been one in sight Nick could have done nothing but strike boldly off for this hedge. He must cross the open, starlit enclosure, and take chances of being seen.

Stepping carefully off the wide porch, and finding thick sward under his feet, the detective set out on a run for the hedge. Each instant he expected a hue and cry—human or canine—behind him.

But he crossed the open space in safety. Not a sound startled his ear. And when he glanced around the place lay as calmly asleep under the stars as one could wish!

But in hurrying so to get out of sight of the house, he had failed to pick a gateway. Indeed, he had seen no such thing. The hedge seemed to entirely surround the premises, and was without a break.

"But that automobile got through somehow, so there must be a gate," Nick thought. "However, I don't care to get around to the rear looking for it. This hedge can't be so thick. I'll break through right here, and run the risk of being seen. If I haven't already been spotted, I guess I sha'n't be noticed now."

Indeed, there was some little shadow right here, and Nick plowed his way through the closely knit branches. He half-expected to find a fence beyond, or some barbed wire to strengthen the hedge, or something like that; but in a moment he stood on the sward beyond.

Something, however, clung around his arm. He tried to pull away and found the tendril grow tighter. It took him a minute or so to unwind a fine, insulated wire which seemed to be endless as he dragged on it.

"By Jove! what can this be?" ejaculated Nick suddenly. "There's another end. Ah! This is no chance wire. It was strung through that hedge for a purpose.

"And that purpose?" he looked back toward the house that he could see only dimly through the barrier. A light suddenly flared up on the second floor.

"By Jove! a burglar-alarm! And I've set it going, of course. Ass that I am! The whole place is aroused.

"The entire hedge was strung with these fine wires. No wonder I saw no guards. There aren't any around here, but that wire-strung hedge acts as a sentinel for the house. Bah! I'm in for it now, that's a fact! I shall pay for my lack of forethought."

Out here under the starlight every object seemed misty. He had no idea regarding the compass directions. He couldn't have told at the moment the direction of Baltimore, for, although he could see certain stars and combinations of planets which he well knew, he did not know whether he was south or north of the city.

Nor could he make out any water in the distance, so did not know the direction of the head of the Chesapeake waterway, or the noble width of the Patapsco River.

Somewhere in the distance was the faint hooting of a train, but whether it was on its way to Havre de Grace, or to Washington, he could not guess.

And there was no sign of a road. He remembered that the auto had come for some distance through what seemed an open grove. The highway must be some distance off.

Yet that seemed quite improbable, too. Surely there must be *some* driving road to the old mansion.

Nick had not come out on the side of the place to find this roadway easily, that was sure. And there was no time for him to hunt for it now.

He had a vivid remembrance of the savage appearance of the six hounds in the courtyard behind the house. With those likely to be set on his trail within the next few minutes, it behooved him to "get busy."

And this he did. He did not stop to question what direction he should take. Any place at all was better than his present situation. His first thought was to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the old house before the canines were loosed.

For that Shade and Grout would very soon know who and what had set off that ingenious burglar-alarm, Nick very well realized. They would not waste much time in breaking into his barricaded prison and searching it.

His absence would explain the alarm, and then, as Shade had promised, the dogs would be set on his trail.

So his feet were winged with some fear as he raced over the short sward. And this fear did not decrease when he heard several pistol-shots fired in rapid succession, behind him.

He guessed that these were fired to attract the "men" Grout had spoken of—the henchmen that the two arch-plotters kept near the mansion-house. The chase would be on shortly.

And he was not mistaken in that. In a very few seconds the dogs began to bay. Their voices lifted over the undulating meadows and groves, and a more chilling sound Nick had seldom heard.

Almost instantly he knew that the beasts were on his trail. Their yelps, eager and sharp, sounded nearer.

They had evidently been brought from the court and their noses put to the scent he had left on the door-stone and porch. But they were not unleashed yet. Nick knew that to be the fact, because of their slowness in coming.

But once outside the hedge, the dogs were evidently given their freedom. Their yelps increased, and once, in looking back from the summit of a wooded rise, he saw several lights flash and knew that there was quite a gang of men after him, too.

"And not a house in sight! I didn't know there was so much empty land in this part of the country," the detective groaned. "Those curs will be upon me yet."

But at the foot of this slope—only a few rods—he came to a wide brook. It might afford a little obstruction to the dogs' course. Bloodhounds are not as intelligent as foxhounds, and these would probably wait for their masters to come up before crossing the stream.

The detective did not care to give them any "water-trail," however. He wanted to keep straight on—and that was his determination. As he fled over the brook on the stepping-stones he drew from his pocket the small object he had picked up in the pantry of the mansion.

It was a common kitchen pepper-box, and he had already assured himself that it was more than half-full of cayenne pepper.

He had not secured this without an object. He knew that, properly scattered in his trail, the hounds would be unable to follow him by scent.

The instant he reached the farther shore of the brook, therefore, he turned and scattered the fine dust, stooping close to the ground, and walking backward for several rods, until he had reached a thick brake.

When he had pushed through that tangle, he began again to shake the pepper in his footsteps. The trick was not a new one. Convicts in breaking jail had often put the hounds out of conceit in this way, and Nick Carter never read, or heard of, anything that would aid him in his business that he did not make a special note of it.

The yelping of the pack seemed almost at the brook-side now. He was effectually screened by the brush and the half-darkness of the evening; but, glancing back, he saw the lanterns flashing again on the higher meadows.

"They'll be down to the brook in a mighty short time. If the pepper stops the dogs, all right. I'll have a chance. But, by thunder! if it doesn't—— Well, it'll be up to me to climb a tree, for if those dogs ever catch me on solid ground, they'll tear me to rags before their masters could reach us and call 'em off!"

CHAPTER X.

NICK IS "PUT ON THE WIRE."

With the yapping of the hounds for music, Nick was not likely to travel at a slow pace. And such another cross-country run he had never made.

There was just enough light to deceive him half a dozen times. He went headlong into two ditches, he

tripped over extended roots, and once he barked his knees severely in falling over a low boulder.

With each mishap, however, his feet seemed to find greater speed. If he lost a moment in a fall, he was up and on again with renewed vigor.

Had he possessed any sort of a weapon that might have served him against the bloodhounds, he would not have hastened so. But with his bare hands he could not hope to fight off the savage beasts.

And it was some time yet before he knew whether the pepper had flung them off the scent, or not. The savage howling continued in the rear, and Nick did not stop until the dogs' prolonged howls grew so faint that he was positive they had been unable to get beyond the brook.

Shade and Grout did not chance to know this trick of the pepper. They were amazed that the hounds could not pick up the scent beyond the brookside, even after they had got them over. And their sneezing and crying only made the men angry at first.

Before the trick was suspected, Nick was fully two miles away and had struck the highroad. And he chanced to strike the road just as an early marketman was wending his way toward Baltimore with his load.

Nick negotiated a ride in a way that the man could not refuse. Had he begged one, the farmer might have been afraid of him, for he certainly was a disreputable-looking object.

But Nick had hidden under the carpet, along with his tools, before being searched, a goodly roll of bills. A show of this money and the tendering of a double sawbuck did the business.

"I reckon you ain't a tramp, then, mister?" drawled the rustic.

"Only in appearance. I lost my way over yonder. For pity's sake who lives in that big house back there about three miles, and has a troop of the bloodiest dogs that ever lived?"

"Oh, gosh! Y' don't mean ter say y' got mixed up with *them* critters. I heered 'em bayin'."

"I believe whoever lives there set 'em on me," declared Nick, with perfect honesty.

"Well, hi guy! that's sartain an adventure. Why, them fellers is counterfeiters, they say. Leastways, that's the story that goes hereabout. It's the old Price mansion, an' is ha'nted, anyway."

Now, Nick knew pretty well that if folks *said* that counterfeiting was done in the old house, that nothing of the kind was carried on there. Doubtless the Federal authorities had long since convinced themselves of *that*.

But the name of the place told him something. It evidently had belonged at some time to relatives of Lora Price, Shade's pretty and accomplished niece.

Now Shade had obtained possession of it, and was using it in his business. And it was a nice, lonesome place for secret business, too. And with a reputation of being ghost-ridden at that!

There was a streak of light in the far east when the market-wagon rattled over the cobbles of the city streets. Nick knew his way about Baltimore now, if he had not the day before when being whirled through these highways in Grout's automobile.

At a certain corner Nick left the farmer and hurried to a hotel where his card, he knew, would gain him attention, and his money would do the rest.

His clothing was in bad shape, and before he appeared in any respectable society it would have to be renewed. This the captain of the bell-hops undertook to attend to for him, and the night-clerk assigned him a room and bath.

These were merely preliminary, however. What Nick wanted was to get into the telephone-booth, and this he did as soon as practicable. He wanted to speak to one of his assistants, and he wanted that favor badly!

Talking over the long wire from Baltimore to New York is not the easiest matter. But at night it is better than by day, for the wires are freer. In half an hour the connection was made and he could even distinguish Patsy's voice at the other end of the humming wire.

"This is Nick," explained the detective, to begin with.

"Sure, chief, I knew it was you!" declared the young fellow's voice. "They told me from Central you wanted to speak with us. I haven't left the house for three days, since we last heard of you. Is everything all right?"

"You can tell me that better than I can tell you," Nick declared.

"How's that, sir?"

"What of importance has happened?"

"Not a thing. It's still as dull as ditch-water. Sure, we're getting no chance at all in this biz. You're doing it all yourself."

"And you may have a chance at it now, Patsy," said Nick.

"How's that?"

"You say there's nothing of importance happened since I went away?"

"Not a thing?"

"For instance—*last evening?*"

"I'm sure I don't understand you."

"Didn't you get an important package by express?"

"There! I was puzzled by that. A box from Baltimore, and it is addressed to you, and in your own fist."

"Ah!" exclaimed Nick, with satisfaction. "Then it arrived?"

"Oh, yes."

"Seals unbroken?"

"Sure!"

"Then my mind is relieved."

"That's all right, chief. *You* may be relieved. But you've got me all stirred up. What's in it?"

"The evidence, I believe, that puts Abe Grout and his gang in our power."

"Holy Moses!" ejaculated Patsy.

"Got it safe?"

"Why—it's on your desk-table. I put it there myself."

"Safe enough, then, I reckon," laughed Nick. "But have an eye on it, Patsy."

"I certainly shall! I'll put it in the safe now I know it's so valuable."

"And now, attend to me, Patsy," said Nick, speaking more carefully. "Take these instructions down and follow them to the letter. I shall depend upon you, remember. Ready?"

"Let her go, chief!" returned his assistant.

For fully five minutes Nick dictated matters that he had thought out in detail as he jounced into town on the marketman's loaded wagon. He was laying out a campaign that nobody but a man with great experience and a remarkable grasp of details could have arranged at such short notice.

When he was finished with Patsy, and the latter had repeated the instructions over the wire to Nick for verification, the detective immediately had a certain broker of his acquaintance called up, although the gentleman would doubtless be in his bed and sound asleep at that hour.

There was some objection being made to Nick's holding this long-distance wire so long; but the detective's name was known, and bore influence in many cities, and he knew how to obtain the favors he desired. For two solid hours he occupied that booth, talking to several different men in New York.

He finished his work just at sunrise by sending a big batch of cipher telegrams, which landed in New York offices like a flock of yellow birds, before the market opened that morning.

Then he went to bed. Sleep was what he needed, for he was completely fagged out.

Yet few men could, after getting in motion a game that might make or break a millionaire, have so peacefully gone to sleep as Nick Carter did on this occasion!

Those early morning hours had been spent by him in pledging a very large amount of collateral that he owned—even to much of his real estate—in a venture which might—as so many similar ventures do—become a boomerang, and, instead of smiting the enemy he sought, return upon his own head!

CHAPTER XI.

THE GIRL.

Four hours' sound sleep; a shower-bath, graduating by slow degrees from blood-heat to crackling cold; and then a rub-down with a coarse towel bound to set a man's blood to pumping clear from his heart to the very tingling ends of his toes and fingers.

After this Nick Carter forgot that he had ever been tired!

The hard work of the previous day, his strenuous race after the ratty man, his own capture and imprisonment, his race across the downs with the hounds on his trail, his tumbling into ditches and over bush and brier, were as though they had not been.

And he did not appear to worry about the game he had set in motion by wire, either. It was something that watching would not help.

He had cast the die. He had risked a large sum in a turn of the die.

He was sailing under the flag of chance, and, whether he won or lost, he could not change the result a hair's breadth by worriment.

Instead, he filled his mind with other thoughts, with other duties. He set forth to pick up other threads of this tangled skein he had begun to unravel.

He went from the hotel to the hospital to which he knew the man who had been knocked senseless by Shade's henchman, had been carried. A word or two with the receiving clerk assured Nick of several things.

The man was still here. He was in a dangerous condition. And the hospital authorities were paying no more attention to him than they were to dozens of other cases of like nature brought in to them.

The man was booked as "Unknown." His description sent to the police had not elicited any response. Nobody knew who he was.

But after Nick had seen him he had no doubt who the injured fellow was. In the excitement of their meeting the day before the detective had only remembered that he seemed familiar; but he was not dressed as on the single previous occasion when Nick had met the young man.

It was evident, indeed, that the patient had intentionally gone forth with nothing about him apt to be recognized by those who knew him well. Although he was not disguised in the general acceptance of the term, he had been dressed so much differently from his usual manner, that he would probably have passed unnoticed in a crowd of his personal friends.

And without doubt he had been near the wharf, and on the lookout for Nick and the *Spoondrift* when they had arrived at Baltimore the previous morning.

"He was there to see me. And he saw something that warned him of coming events and my danger, before I discovered the game myself," ruminated Nick. "I owe him a good turn, and that's sure!"

And characteristically Nick Carter began to pay off this debt in the handsomest manner possible.

He might have tipped the surgeons off as to the young man's identity. They would have been glad then to have done all they could for him.

But Nick had another scheme in view. He said nothing about the unconscious man's name. But he ordered him put into a private room, agreed to settle all his bills for extras, and saw to it that everything the hospital could afford was at his disposal.

Then the detective sallied forth once more, and after making sure that he was not being dogged by any shadow of Shade's hiring, found an opportunity to make certain changes in his appearance, buy a sample-grip, and board a Washington express in the guise of a busy drummer.

He knew that the trains, at least, would be watched. Shade and Grout would desire to keep tabs on him, if possible. And the former might suspect, for one reason, that he would aim for Washington instead of taking train to New York.

He was one of the first persons off the train when it rolled into the Washington station. And he refused the offer of every cabman in the line. But as he reached the street a belated hack was just getting into the curb at the tail of those already waiting, and he walked down there and insisted on riding in that particular vehicle.

He had already taken occasion to arm himself in Baltimore, but he was running no chances now. What Shade and his confederates would do he did not know. Shade himself was probably receiving reports just now from Wall Street that would give him the surprise of his life; but he might have many eyes on the watch for Nick in Washington city, just the same.

The detective had himself driven to an inferior hotel, where he could enter by one door, leave his sample-case with the clerk, and walk out by another exit. He was not far from the Blank hotel then, and he hurried to this, his proper destination.

"Ah, Mr. Carter," said the clerk, as Nick strolled in, now in his proper person once more. "Been away?"

"Took a little trip. Any mail for me?"

"Not any. But you've had a caller, or two," returned the clerk, looking in the box. "Here's some cards."

He produced several, two of which made Nick smile. They were "Mr. Reginald Byle, and Mr. Ian Campbell."

"By the way," said Nick carelessly. "Is Shade here—Paul G. Shade?"

"Out of town."

"Perhaps his secretary——"

"Went with him. She's not very well, I understand. Gone away for her health. By Jove, Carter! she's a pretty young woman."

"She is indeed," returned the detective, very thoughtful.

Suddenly he bethought him of a possibility.

"I say, you know," he said, confidentially leaning over the desk to speak to the clerk. "Is that odd old couple—Furtz, was their name?—still on the premises?"

"Oh, dear, yes! You mean those old folks from up York State? Sure! Nice old couple, aren't they?"

"So they impressed me," said Nick, without a smile.

"Know them well?"

"I've met a mutual friend."

"I haven't seen the old gent around much to-day. But *she* was down to lunch. Dear old party!"

"Humph! Rather dear, I should say," murmured Nick, as he crossed the corridor and entered one of the elevators.

Instead of being carried up to his own room, however, he got off at the floor on which he knew Shade's suite and the rooms of the "Furtz" couple to be situated.

At least half a dozen rooms were included in Shade's suite, and when they were at the hotel—Shade and his niece—they had their own butler, chambermaid, and boy.

The doors were all closed, however, and as Nick went slowly along the hall he heard no sound from the suite. Beyond these rooms were the bedroom and sitting-room of the masquerading couple, namely Mr. and Mrs. William Furtz.

Nick had made sure these were no other than Paul G. Shade and his smart niece, during the first evening of his arrival in Washington. Now he was about to put the thing to the test.

He rapped modestly on the door of the Furtz sitting-room. He had to rap twice before any attention was paid to it from within.

Then he heard a door closed quickly, and after a moment a light step announced the approach of a female. At the door the female hesitated as though uncertain whether the raps had been at this portal or not.

Nick gently tapped on the panel again.

"Who is there?" asked a clear voice.

"I beg your pardon! Are you Mrs. Furtz?" queried the detective.

"I am. And I am alone," said the lady quickly.

"Mr. Furtz is not in?"

"No."

"I am *so* sorry," said Nick, carefully modulating his voice. "But I have a message—can I see you for a moment, madam?"

With some hesitation the door was unlocked and opened a little way. Nick stood full in the light of the hall so that his features could not be mistaken. He knew that the girl would surely remember him.

And clever as she was, this was what she did! That is, she *showed* that she knew Nick, and his appearance here frightened her!

"Oh!" she cried, starting back and making to shut the door again.

But almost instantly she recovered her poise. Nick admired her greatly—not alone for her ability as an actress, but for her coolness and adroitness in handling this unlooked-for surprise.

"It is the gentleman who stood on the steps of the White House the other evening, I declare!" she cried, her soft voice quavering in the most natural manner in the world.

"I declare, I was saying to William that he ought to know you. You were so kind to offer to help when I slipped.

"And you *did* help, too. I remember that you ran for my husband's cane. Won't you come in?" she exclaimed, as though tempted out of her natural hesitation to receive a man in her sitting-room alone, by feelings of hospitality.

"Thank you, madam. I *will* come in for a moment," Nick said seriously, and stepped over the threshold into the sitting-room.

The girl retreated in a most stately way to the center-table. But she did not sit down herself, nor did she offer him a seat. Her cleverness amused Nick greatly, but he hid the smile that came to his lips, and said:

"Perhaps you can favor me as well as Mr. Furtz, madam?"

"Perhaps, sir. What can I do for you?" she asked, with her sweeping little curtsy, which Nick had found so charming on another occasion.

"I am troubled by a message that I have to deliver——"

"For my husband?" she asked, betraying some anxiety, either real or feigned, Nick did not know.

"No, madam. For an entirely different person. I understand that you are personally acquainted with—er—Mr. Paul G. Shade?"

Not a quiver of the eyelash betrayed her—nor did she flush under his penetrating glance. She had wonderful control of her features for one so young.

"I beg your pardon!" she said, rather hastily perhaps. "I am not acquainted with the gentleman."

"No?"

"Not at all."

"Mr. Furtz, then——"

She laughed musically—delightfully, and nodded the little lace cap that became so well her style and apparent age.

"You are entirely mistaken, sir. We do not know Mr. Shade. But he was very kind, I understand, when we came here, to let us have this room. He was very kind.

"The young lady, his niece, I believe—you have met her?"

"I have seen her," and for a moment her voice shook and she dropped her gaze.

Nick wickedly played with her as a cat does with its victim.

"Ah! A pretty young woman."

"So—so I am told."

"But surely you have seen her close enough to have an opinion?" and he laughed.

"I—I—— Well, yes, she *is* pretty."

"A grudging recommendation, Mrs. Furtz. Ah! I fancy that she does not stand well according to *your* standards—eh?"

The other was actually speechless, but Nick did not appear to notice her confusion.

"Nevertheless, I believe you would do her a kindness, Mrs. Furtz?"

"Most certainly!" exclaimed she, lifting her eyes again to him.

"I have a message—one of serious import to her," said Nick, becoming grave again at once.

"What—what is the matter? Is her—her uncle——"

"Perhaps he ought to know it first, and so break the news to her gently," Nick hastened to say.

"Oh! I thought that perhaps something had happened to Mr. Shade?"

"Not at all. But something *has* happened."

"Indeed!"

"A serious something."

"And this interests Miss Price?"

"It does indeed. I am unable to see her, as she is out. Would you advise me about breaking the news to her?"

"For pity's sake, man! What is it?" cried she at last.

Nick looked at her searchingly for half a minute. Then he deliberately stepped back to the door, closed it, and turned the key in the lock.

"What do you mean, sir?" she cried, her voice vibrant with either anger or fear, he could not tell which.

As Nick, making no reply, took a step toward her again, she sprang away and reached a row of buttons on the wall.

"Stop, sir! What does this mean?" she gasped.

"Don't send for assistance. You will not want it," said the detective seriously but quietly.

"What do you mean?" repeated the girl in masquerade, forgetting her part now.

"I only ask you to deliver a message to Miss Price," said Nick swiftly. "It is from Ian Campbell!"

She turned from the push-buttons, and her pallor alarmed him.

"Wha—what about him?" she murmured.

"He has been injured. He has been stricken down in the streets of Baltimore. He is now in the hospital there, unconscious," declared Nick, with almost brutal directness, but believing that a sudden revelation would do less harm now than aught else.

CHAPTER XII.

A SPOKE IN SHADE'S WHEEL.

The girl might have fainted, but Nick hoped not. He had had one experience with Miss Lora Price under similar circumstances.

In a never-to-be-forgotten auto ride, when Nick was bound hand and foot and he had seen a black-snake drop into the seat beside his fair chauffeur, Lora had fainted then. It had been hours before she came to her senses.

This was a different matter, however. Of such strange stuff are women made. Nick had made up his mind that the girl loved Ian Campbell, the Baltimore millionaire and soldier of fortune, very much indeed. The news that he was hurt served her nerves like a tonic.

She sprang across the room, forgetting the part she had been playing altogether now, and seized the detective by the arm.

"Is it true?" she gasped. "Do you mean it? Hurt?—badly hurt? You are not deceiving me? My heaven! you are not lying to me?"

"Never spoke a truer word in my life, Miss Price," he declared. She overlooked entirely the fact that he had called her by her right name. She gave up every atom of appearances in her assumed character. She could only think of Campbell and his situation.

"How was it? How did it happen? Will he live?"

"The surgeons assured me he is not fatally hurt. But he is badly injured, and there may have to be an operation performed. His skull may be broken."

"As bad as that? Who did it?"

"I will tell you how it happened," returned Nick slowly. "Mr. Campbell had learned of the double-dealing of somebody whom he had trusted——"

She shrank from him, and her pale face turned suddenly fiery red.

"I do not mean you. His opinion of *you*, Miss Price, I fancy, would not easily change. But he learned that Paul Shade had been using his yacht in a way that he could not approve. He loaned her to me, in fact. I arrived in Baltimore yesterday morning on the *Spoondrift*.

"In some way Mr. Campbell understood that I was being pursued by your uncle. Shade had a gang there at the wharves to 'do' me. Oh! I am not accusing you of being a party to *this* crime, Miss Price," added Nick, with a wave of his hand.

"Anyhow, Campbell warned me of my danger. And to pay for it he suffered an attack on the street, and was injured by one of the paid employees of Shade and Abe Grout."

"Oh, that Grout! I have always feared him!" she murmured, with trembling lips.

"I hate to say it, young lady," grumbled Nick. "But you should fear that precious uncle of yours, too."

"Sir!"

"Oh, have it your own way. But remember I have warned you. And Shade knew very well that Campbell had been hurt, and he let him go to the hospital and be cared for like a common patient.

"Oh, don't fear! He's having the best of care now. A private room, and all that. But the hospital people don't know yet what or who he is!"

"Oh, sir! I am going to him!" cried the girl impulsively, leaping from the chair into which she had fallen.

At that instant there was a rap on the door. She started in affright. Nick put his finger on his lips, stood aside, and motioned her to answer the call.

She pulled herself together instantly. The interruption was a good thing, perhaps. It gave her the chance of recovering her coolness.

She opened the door, found a telegraph-boy outside, and took in the despatch he offered her. It was addressed to "Mrs. Wm. Furtz."

She read it, with a stricken face, and then tossed it toward the detective.

"Is this your work, sir?" she asked.

Nick read the message without betraying the least excitement:

"MRS. FURTZ: Everything in deal gone wrong. Somebody ahead of us. Beaten at our own game. Suspect N. C. Look out.
(Signed) "S."

Nick Carter smiled enigmatically.

"I never tell secrets, Miss Lora. Both you and Shade will have to keep guessing, I am afraid."

He passed it back to her. She flung it on the floor and stamped upon it in sudden rage.

"What do I care for the money?" she cried. "I am going to Baltimore at once. I am going to—to Mr. Campbell!"

* * * * * * *

"I see you have a part of the story," said Nick Carter, closeted with Mr. Reginald Pyle, the president's private secretary. "I *am* the guilty man. I have used knowledge that I had no right to, to bear a certain stock.

"When the decision becomes known to-morrow, and the stock begins to drop, I shall deliver my stock, buying at a price ridiculously small. I am going to clear two hundred thousand dollars—and that's not a bad day's work, is it?" and he chuckled.

"You are a villain of the deepest dye," declared Pyle, with a grim nod. "But, Mr. Carter, how did you learn of this matter?."

"By hearing some private correspondent of Shade wire him the facts. And that correspondent I have already spotted in a government telegraph office. I can arrest him at any time. I have Shade on the run, anyway. I have Abe Grout just where I wanted him. The letter I recovered from the sea will prove that he was back of Blaney, Lowell & Co., and it was his orders they carried out. The matter seems pretty nearly cleaned up—even to the girl."

"The girl?" repeated Pyle, raising his eyebrows.

"Miss Price, I mean."

"Oh!"

"An extremely handsome girl—and, I believe, not a bad one at heart. I have shown up her uncle to her, and between him and her lover I think there can be little choice which she will choose.

"She has gone to Campbell and will nurse him back to health—and he'll marry her, of course! Shade and Grout are fixed for fair, I tell you. And they've lost a pot of money, into the bargain.

"I had my brokers buy up the very stocks they had planned to seize two hours before they were ready to buy. It was the blow of Shade's career."

"But Judge Bernard, Mr. Carter? What have you to report regarding him?" queried Pyle earnestly.

"Why, sir, I believe that my discovery of the government telegrapher who is friendly to Shade quite exonerates Judge Bernard. I will give you the telegrapher's name and you can easily find out his connection with the leak of that decision which has troubled the president so much. Tell his excellency, with my compliments, that I believe it is safe to give Judge Bernard a clean bill of health. And now—well, I'm off to round 'em all up and clear up my desk for the next case. Good-day to you, Mr. Pyle!" said Nick Carter.

THE END.

The next number—618—will contain "The Case Against Judge Bernard; or, How Nick Carter Solved a Judicial Problem."

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NEW YORK, October 24, 1908.

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TOO CLEVER BY HALF.

By HENRY CLARKE.

When I was in Europe last summer I met, one fine evening in London, one of my friends who had made his own way in the world, and who, in his upward progress, had encountered so many different kinds of men that he had learned to take everything quietly, but who had retained for the enjoyment of his friends all his original freshness and goodness of heart.

We were chatting on our usual topics, when a man of middle age, exceedingly well-dressed, stopped in front of us, and, putting out his hand to my friend, who, not seeming to notice this, raised his hand quickly to his hat, said in a tone of voice that seemed to me somewhat ironical:

"What, what! Always happy? Yes, yes. Well, well, so much the better. Good-by."

"Who is this gentleman?" said I, when we were some steps away.

"What, don't you know him? Then I'll tell you his history. In fact, he will furnish for us a practical illustration of the question we have been discussing. Is he a swindler, or is he a genius? You shall decide the question for yourself.

"I made his acquaintance in 1878. He was then employed in a large commercial house in New York.

"In 1882 he thought it prudent to take a change of air, and took refuge in London, to wait for events. As time went on his resources were exhausted, and he was obliged to take his watch to a pawnbroker. It was a gold watch, and he noticed that the man, after a quick, keen look at it, tried the knob with an acid, and immediately gave him the money that he asked for and his ticket. This method of testing the gold watch set him thinking. Having found the means of redeeming his watch, he took it to another office. There was the same quick look and the same mode of testing. He saw that this was the custom.

"Just at this time an old aunt, who had brought him up, died and left him three thousand dollars. Then he hastened to turn his inheritance into cash, and has known how to make it so fruitful that he has an income of two thousand dollars a year, and lives comfortably, with all sorts of small enjoyments."

"Did he make his fortune in trade?"

"No."

"In manufactures?"

"No. It was a plan of his own. Taking with him a sufficient sum of money, he went to Geneva, and, entering a watch-factory, ordered two hundred watches of a certain pattern. The cases were to be of copper, heavily gilt, but the knobs of pure gold. Taking these with him to London, he pawned these two hundred watches in a few days to different pawnbrokers. All were tested at the knob. They cost him eight dollars each. The pawnbrokers advanced him twenty dollars on each. So you see the affair paid very well."

"Certainly; but then, he is a swindler."

"You think so?"

"And you, also, I have no doubt."

"Well, perhaps. In the first place, his plan has never been found out, and he was able to realize a fortune from it; in fact, he could have carried it on up to the present moment without any inconvenience, but his tastes are simple, and he is naturally indolent, so that when he had enough he retired modestly, and thus left room for others."

"But the pawnbrokers must have suffered considerably."

"No. They did not lose one penny, for all these watches were withdrawn within the time allowed, and the money advanced on each of them was repaid."

"How long did he continue this business?"

"For five years."

"And he was never refused?"

"Never. To pawn one watch, ten watches, a hundred watches in London is a very simple operation; but to pawn thousands of them for five years, to gain twelve dollars on each one, and to cause them to be redeemed, each one regularly by the payment of the sum advanced on each, that is the miracle—that is the stroke of genius."

"That must have been very difficult."

"Not at all. It was as simple as the egg of Columbus. This was his plan. When the weather was clear and the pavements dry, he walked quietly about through different streets and squares, dropping from time to time one of his pawn-tickets. When he had thus emptied his pockets he went home with a clear conscience. The next day all these watches were redeemed by those who had picked up the pawn-tickets, and he could recommence his operations without any difficulty."

"Why, then, did you decline to shake hands with him?"

"Well, I have not yet made up my mind whether he was not a swindler, after all."

JEWELERS' WASTE MATERIAL.

Every precaution is taken in the establishment of a jeweler who knows his business for the preservation of all material thought to contain the slightest suspicion of gold or silver that may have fallen from the work-table.

The bulk of the filings are caught on a tin tray fixed on the workman's knees, and held by means of a "skin."

Both the work-tables and the floor of the shop are swept carefully every morning, and the dirt gathered up and placed in a box. The water in which the workmen wash before leaving the place is poured into a barrel and allowed to settle, and the more scrupulous employers have their men's aprons cleaned, and the water kept in the same way.

The following morning the clear water is drawn off by a tap half-way up the tub, and the sediment allowed to remain at the bottom.

All old brushes, leathers, cloths, etc., used for polishing are burned after being used a certain time, and the ashes are added to the "sweep," or litter.

After a few weeks the valuable dirt is packed in a box,

and either forwarded to the center of the jewelers' waste smelting-trade, or taken by the tradesman himself to certain houses in the town where he may live, which contain the furnaces and mufflers required for the purpose.

By means of powerful magnets, all iron and steel is first extracted from the "sweep," which is then placed in crucibles and thrust into furnaces of intense heat.

Everything is burned with the exception of the metal, which remains in a lump at the bottom of the crucible.

This lump is then passed on to the refiner, who separates the metals and makes a return of their value to be forwarded to the customer, who either has the gold, silver, and copper sent back to him, and pays a small amount for the cost of smelting, or sells it at market-prices to the smelters.

SOMETHING LIKE A FARM.

The biggest farm—if "farm" it can be called—is that owned by Don Luis Terrazas, in the State of Chihuahua, Mexico, which measures from north to south 150 miles, and from east to west 200 miles, or 8,000,000 acres in all. On its prairies and mountains roam 1,000,000 head of cattle, 700,000 sheep, and 100,000 horses. The "farmhouse" is probably the most magnificent in the world, for it cost $2,000,000 to build and is more richly furnished than many a royal palace. On the homestead alone are employed a hundred male servants. The gardens are superbly laid out, the stables more magnificent than those of the German emperor, and there is accommodation for 500 guests if necessary.

Scattered over this vast ranch are a hundred outlying stations, each one of which has charge of a certain portion of the estate. The horsemen, cow-punchers, line-riders, shepherds, and hunters number 2,000, and the Terrazas ranch is the only one in the world which maintains its own slaughtering and packing-plant. Each year 150,000 head of cattle are slaughtered, dressed, and packed, and 100,000 sheep. Don Luis personally superintends the different industries on his ranch, covering many thousands of miles on horseback during a twelvemonth. Don Luis was at one time Governor of Chihuahua, but public life did not suit him; it was too quiet, and he preferred to spend his life riding over the plains and looking after his own enterprises. He is three times as rich as any other man in Mexico, and has the name of being liberal and generous toward his workpeople.

Don Luis is a very handsome man, married to a beautiful wife. He is the father of twelve children—seven sons and five daughters. The sons are all associated with Don Luis in looking after the ranch, while the daughters—said to be the most beautiful women in Mexico—remain quietly at the homestead. All the children were educated in the United States, are highly accomplished, have traveled through Europe, and speak several languages.

Don Luis founded his cattle-ranch about fourteen years ago, and four years later he sought to import the finest cattle from Scotland and England. But there was a considerable difficulty in the way. The import duty on foreign cattle was so heavy that it was impossible to bring over the animals in quantities sufficient for his purpose, so Don Luis appealed to the Mexican Government, pointed out the absurdity of restricting the importation of good stock into the country, and succeeded in getting the import-tax repealed. Since that time Terrazas has increased his stock by the importation of something like 5,000 bulls of the best breeds from the famous studs of Europe.

Five years ago Terrazas installed on his ranch four big reservoirs, costing $500,000, besides which there are 300 wells scattered over the huge farm, some of them going down to a depth of 500 feet. These wells, the water from which is raised by means of windmills, cost another $500,000.

Every kind of grain is grown, and Don Luis is constantly experimenting in the raising of different "foods" for supplying the wants of his immense herds during the rainless seasons.

An enemy which has to be sternly fought on this great ranch is fire, and scarcely a summer passes without great tracks of prairie being laid waste by its destroying advance. Throughout the torrid months there is a man stationed on the "look-out" at every station each hour of the twenty-four, and directly he sees indications which tell him that a fire has started, he rings the massive alarm-bell, and in an incredibly short time men come riding in, ready to fight the danger with their lives, if necessary.

The frightened cattle are driven sideways from the line of the oncoming fire, and then the enemy is attacked from the rear. It is no good attempting to stop a prairie-fire from the front, for its progress is too rapid and too annihilating. Heavy chains are dragged along the ground, which help to weaken and dissipate the fire. Across the prairie long furrows 50 feet apart are quickly made, and these also help to stem the progress of the fire. All night the fight is kept up, and not until the last spark is quenched are the men able to take food and rest.

In these efforts to subdue the flames Don Luis and his sons are usually to be seen working like demons and urging their men to greater efforts. Fighting a prairie-fire has all the elements of danger, and for excitement it has few equals. For this reason Don Luis takes a fierce delight in combating the flames, and declares that it is one of the fascinations of a prairie life.

SKATING WITH SAILS.

"Skating with sails," said a man from up the Hudson River, one day last winter, "is magnificent sport.

"This kind of skating is one of the principal pastimes. The boys arrange regular races, and use great ingenuity in getting up new and more speedy patterns of sails. You can skate anywhere with a sail—tack, come about, fly in the teeth of the wind, and the whole list of maneuvers," and the Hudson River man went on enthusiastically as the memories of exciting fun crowded in upon him.

The outfit is comparatively nothing. A few yards of canvas, a couple of sticks, some rings, needle and thread, and there you are. You can make your own sail, and a few hours will suffice to do it. The apparatus is easily portable. Roll it together, tie it up, and you can carry it under your arm as you would an umbrella.

There are in the main two varieties of sail in use, the leg o' mutton, and square sail. There is great latitude in the modifications of these to suit personal whim, and it is a study among experts as to what form of sail is the speediest. Some of the riggings, too, are very elaborate, with top-sails, penants, and rope riggings enough to bewilder a tar. But the simple sail is effective enough to begin on, and the elaboration may come afterward. The sail is carried behind the back, the skater holding it with one hand on the upright pole and one on the edge of the sheet, if it be a leg o' mutton sail, or with both hands grasping the sides of the sheet, if it be a square sail. Then, by shifting the position of the sheet to one side or to the other, it is easy to make the starboard, or the port tack, or to come about at will.

The feet make no motion at all. Any effort to skate retards the speed. It is only necessary to keep upright and manage the sail, but these are important particulars, for a fall when going at full speed may result in a broken nose or a sprained ankle.

As to speed, the velocity of the wind is the only limit to it, and the sensations as one goes flying over the ice full in the wind must be experienced to be appreciated.

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